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***Including* BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

A WARNING TO MISS EARTH	Isaac Asimov	6
THE PENCIL	Edmund Crispin	20
MR. STRANG FOLLOWS THROUGH	William Brittain	24
THE LAUGHING CHEF	Ron Goulart	35
GIDEON AND THE PARK VANDAL	J. J. Marric (John Creasey)	42
STOLTZFUSS' REVENGE	Jacob Hay	47
THE MAN ON THE TELEPHONE	Norah Lofts	54
COYOTE STREET	Gary Brandner	67
MUSICAL CHAIRS	Ira Solet	77
WHEN TOMORROW COMES	Vincent James	80
GIVE ME LIB, OR GIVE ME DEATH	Rod Reed	86
A MURDER COMING	James Powell	95
THE CASE OF THE MISSING LADY	Agatha Christie	105
NO ROUGH STUFF	Robert L. Fish	117
TRAPPED	Ruth Rendell	127
THE THEFT OF THE CUCKOO CLOCK	Edward D. Hoch	144
THE JURY BOX	John Dickson Carr	103

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

Here is the eighth recorded session of the Black Widowers club, and this time it is artist Mario Gonzalo who brings the guest of the evening—almost with malice aforethought. For the guest is Lieutenant Aloysius Gordon of the 17th Precinct, and he has a problem. But it is only fair to warn you that you are in for an erudite evening (no, the art of conversation is not dead)...

A WARNING TO MISS EARTH

by ISAAC ASIMOV

There was a certain frostiness about the monthly meeting of the Black Widowers and it clearly centered on the guest brought by artist Mario Gonzalo. The guest was a large man. His cheeks were plump and smooth, his hair was almost nonexistent, and he wore a vest, something no one had seen at the Black Widowers in living memory.

His name was Aloysius Gordon and the trouble began when he calmly introduced himself by name and occupation, announcing quite casually that he was connected with the 17th Police Precinct. It was like lowering a window shade against the sun, for the spark went out of the dinner at once.

Gordon had no way of comparing the quiet now prevailing with the hubbub characteristic of the usual Black Widower dinner. He had no way of knowing that writer Emmanuel Rubin was almost supernaturally restrained and had not once contradicted anyone; that the voice of Thomas Trumbull, code expert, even when it was used, was subdued; that Geoffrey Avalon, the patent attorney, actually finished his second drink; that twice organic chemist James Drake had stubbed out a cigarette that was only half smoked; and that

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Roger Halsted, teacher of mathematics, having unfolded the piece of paper on which he had written the limerick based on the fifth book of the *Iliad*, merely looked at it absently, wrinkled his high pink forehead, and put it away.

In fact, Gordon seemed interested only in Henry, the club's official waiter. Gordon had followed Henry with his eyes, and there was an unmistakable light of curiosity in them. Henry, ordinarily perfect in his job, upset a glass of water, much to the horror of all members present. The waiter's cheekbones seemed to show in his unlined face.

Trumbull rose rather ostentatiously and moved in the direction of the men's room. The gesture he made was unobtrusive but none the less urgent for, a half minute later, Gonzalo also left the table.

In the men's room Trumbull said in a harsh whisper, "Why the hell did you bring that fellow?"

"He's an interesting guy," said Gonzalo defensively, "and it's host's privilege. I can bring anyone I want."

"He's a policeman."

"He's a plainclothesman."

"What's the difference? Do you know him personally, or is he here professionally?"

Gonzalo raised his hands in a kind of helpless anger. His dark eyes bulged as they usually did in emotional moments. "I know him personally. I met him—it's none of your business how I met him, Tom—I tell you I *know* him."

"What did you tell him about Henry?"

"What do you mean what did I tell—"

"Oh, come on, don't play games. Haven't you seen the guy watching Henry's every move? Why should he watch a waiter?"

"I told him Henry's a whiz at solving mysteries."

"In how much detail?"

"No detail at all," said Gonzalo, with heat. "Don't you suppose I know that nothing that goes on in the banquet room is ever mentioned outside? I said Henry was a whiz at solving puzzles."

"And he was interested, I suppose."

"Well, he said he would like to attend one of our meetings and I—"

Trumbull said, "You realize this could be embarrassing for Henry. Did you consult him?"

Gonzalo played with one of the brass buttons on his blazer. "If I see that Henry's embarrassed I'll use host's privilege and cut the proceedings short."

"What if this Gordon guy doesn't play along?"

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Gonzalo looked miserable, then shrugged. They returned to the table.

When Henry was pouring out the coffee and the time came for putting the guest on the griddle, there was still no increase in verve. Gonzalo offered the role of inquisitor to Trumbull as was customary, and Trumbull looked unhappy about it.

The traditional first question was blurted out. "Mr. Gordon, how do you justify your existence?"

"At the moment," said Gordon, in a rich baritone, "by adding to the pleasure of this occasion, I hope."

"In what way?" asked Avalon glumly.

"It is my understanding, gentlemen," said Gordon, "that guests are expected to pose a problem which the members of the club then attempt to solve."

Trumbull shot a furious glance at Gonzalo and said, "No, no, that's all wrong. Some guests have presented problems, but they were more or less side-issues. All that's expected of a guest is interesting conversation."

"Besides," said Drake, in his dry voice, "it's Henry who always does the solving. The rest of us just bat things around—rather foolishly, I might say."

"For God's sake, Jim," began Trumbull, but Gordon's voice overrode the code expert's.

"That's exactly what I've been given to understand," Gordon said. "Now I am here in a strictly social capacity and not as a member of the police department at all. Just the same, I can't help having a professional interest in the matter. In fact, I'm damned curious about Henry, so I've come to test him—if I may, that is," he added in response to the cold silence that had fallen over everyone else.

Avalon was frowning and on his face, with its neat mustache, its closely cut and neatly kept chin beard, and its luxurious eyebrows, a frown was a portentous phenomenon.

He said, "Mr. Gordon, this is a private club, the meetings of which serve no purpose but social cameraderie. Henry is our waiter and we value him and we do not wish him to be harassed in this room. If your presence here is purely social and not professional, as you say, I think it would be best if we leave Henry to himself."

Henry had just completed the coffee ritual and he interrupted with the faintest trace of agitation in his voice. He said, "Thank you, Mr. Avalon. I appreciate your

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concern. However, it may improve the situation if I explain something to Mr. Gordon."

He turned to the guest and went on earnestly, "Mr. Gordon, on some half-dozen occasions I have been able to make some obvious point or other in connection with some problem that arose at the dinners. The puzzles were, in themselves, trivial, and not at all the sort that would interest a policeman. I know quite well that in solving the kind of cases that interest policemen, what is most important are records, informants, rather tedious procedural work, and the cooperation of many different men and agencies. All this is quite beyond my capabilities.

"In fact, I could not even do what I have done were it not for the other members of the club. The Black Widowers are ingenious men who can find complicated answers to any problem. When they are all done, then, assuming none of the complicated answers is correct, I can sometimes wiggle past the complications to the simple truth. That is all I do, and I assure you that it is not worth your while to test me."

Gordon nodded. "In other words, Henry, if there's a gangland killing and we have to track down half a dozen hoods and check out their alibis, or try to find some bystanders not afraid to tell us what they saw, you couldn't help us."

"Not at all, sir."

"But if I have an odd piece of paper that carries some words that might make sense and then again might not, and that may require a little thought past the complications to the simple truth, you could help."

"Probably not, sir."

"But would you look at the paper and give me your thoughts on the matter?"

"Is that the test, sir?"

"I suppose we can call it that," said Gordon.

"Well, then," said Henry, with a slow shake of his head, "Mr. Gonzalo is the host. If he's willing to have you introduce it, then, by the rules of the club, you may."

Gonzalo looked uncomfortable. Then he said, defiantly, "Go on, Lieutenant, show it to him."

"Hold on," said Trumbull, pointing his blunt finger at Gonzalo. "Have you seen it, Mario?"

"Yes."

"Can you make any sense out of it?"

"No," said Gonzalo, "but it's the kind of thing Henry might be able to throw light on."

Rubin said, "I don't think

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we ought to put Henry on the spot like that."

But Henry said, "It's host's privilege, sir. I'm willing to look at it."

Gordon brought a piece of paper, folded into quarters, out of his upper-right vest pocket. He held it over his shoulder and Henry took it. Henry looked at it for a moment, then handed it back.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but I cannot see anything in it except what it says."

Drake held out his hand. "How about passing it around? Is that all right with you, Mr. Gordon?"

"I'm willing," said Gordon. He gave it to Halsted, who sat at his right. Halsted read it and passed it on. There was absolute silence till it had made its circle and returned to Gordon. Gordon glanced at it briefly and put it back in his pocket.

The message, in full, written in a scrawled hand, read:

Woe unto you, Jezebels.

Death unto you, Rahab.

"It sounds Biblical," said Gonzalo. "Doesn't it?" He looked automatically at Rubin who was the Biblical authority of the group.

"It sounds Biblical," said Rubin, "but that is not a quotation from the Bible. You can take my word on that."

"No one's likely to question your word on the Bible, Manny," said Avalon.

Gordon said, "That note was delivered to a girl at the entrance to a restaurant in which the Miss Earth contestants were holding a press conference."

"Who delivered it?"

"A drifter. He had been given a dollar to hand the note to the girl, but he couldn't describe the person who had given it to him, except that it was a man. There is no reason to suppose the drifter was more than an intermediary. We checked him out."

Halsted said, "Any fingerprints?"

Gordon said, "Any number of superimposed smudges. Nothing useful."

Avalon looked austere and said, "I suppose that the Jezebels mentioned in the note referred to the young ladies in the Miss Earth contest."

"That seems a natural thought," said Gordon. "The question is which one."

"All of them, I should say," said Avalon. "The note uses the plural, and the kind of person who uses the term in that context would not make fine distinctions. Anyone who presents her beauty to the public gaze for judgment would be a Jezebel. So all of them would be Jezebels."

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'But what about the second phrase?" asked Gordon.

Rubin said, with just a trace of self-importance, "I'll explain that. Suppose the writer is the kind who reads the Bible every day and hears God whispering in his ear, directing him to destroy immorality. Such a guy would automatically write in Biblical style. It so happens that the chief poetic device in Biblical times was the repetition of the same sentence in a slightly different way, such as—" He thought for a while, then said, "For instance: *Hear my words, O ye wise men; and give ear unto me, ye that have knowledge.*"

Rubin's straggly beard grew stragglier as his lips parted in a broad smile and his eyes glinted through his thick spectacles as he said, "The quotation is from the Book of Job."

"Parallelism," muttered Avalon.

Gordon said, "You mean he's just saying the same thing twice?"

"That's right," said Rubin. "First your writer predicted woe and then he predicted the ultimate woe, death. First he called them Jezebels, then he called them Rahabs."

"Not quite," said Gordon. "Jezebel is in the plural. Rahab isn't. The fellow who wrote that speaks of Jezebels, plural, when he says 'Woe'; but only Rahab, singular, when he predicts 'Death.'"

"May I see that paper again?" said Rubin. It was handed to him and he studied it. Then he said, "The way this fellow writes, I don't know whether we can .expect exact spelling. He may have meant to put an 's' at the end of Rahab."

"He *may* have," said Gordon. "but we can't rely on that. His spelling and punctuation are correct and, scrawl or not, the 's' at the end of Jezebels is clear and sharp."

"It seems to me," said Avalon, "it would be safer to assume that the singular is what he meant, unless we have good reason to think the contrary."

Drake tried to blow a smoke ring (an attempt at which no one had ever seen him succeed) and said, "Do you take this thing seriously, Mr. Gordon?"

"My private inclinations," said Gordon, "are not in question. The note has a certain psychotic quality about it and I feel pretty safe in saying that if the writer is not playing a stupid practical joke, then he's crazy. And crazy people have to be taken seriously. Suppose the writer is someone who considers himself a spokesman for the wrath of God. Naturally, he announces it; he sends for the word of God because that's

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what the Biblical prophets did."

"And he announces it in poetic terms—" began Halsted.

"Because that's what the Biblical prophets did, too," said Gordon, nodding. "A man like that may just possibly decide to be the arm of God as well as His voice. We can't take a chance.—You understand that the Miss Earth contest offers a more ticklish situation than the Miss America contest does."

"Because there are foreign contestants, I suppose," said Rubin.

"That's right. There are about sixty contestants altogether and exactly one—Miss United States—is home-grown. We'd just as soon nothing happened to any of them, even a minor incident. I don't say it would plunge the world into an international crisis if anything did happen, but the State Department would be very unhappy. So a note like this means that the police have to supply protection for all sixty girls and these days we don't have that much manpower available."

"If you don't mind," said Trumbull, frowning, "what the hell do you expect us to do about it?"

Gordon said, "It's just possible he may not be planning to kill all the girls. He may have only one in mind, so that is why he uses the singular when he talks of death. Perhaps Henry might give me some ideas as to how to narrow it down. We'd rather concentrate on ten girls than on sixty. But we'd rather concentrate on only one girl, if possible."

"From that note?" said Trumbull. "You want Henry to pick out one Miss Earth contestant from that note?"

He turned to look at Henry, and Henry said, "I have *no* idea, Mr. Trumbull."

Gordon put the note away again. "I thought you might tell me who Rahab is. Why should he call one particular girl Rahab and threaten to kill her?"

Gonzalo said suddenly. "Why should we suppose that Rahab applies to the girl he's after? Maybe it's his signature. Maybe it's a pseudonym he's using because Rahab was some important prophet or executioner in the Bible."

Rubin let out his breath in a snort, "Oh, boy! Mario, how can even an artist know so little? 'Rahab' is part of the line. If it were the signature he would have put it at the bottom. If he's the kind of guy who wants to call down the wrath of God in public, he would sign it proudly and unmistakably if he signed it at all. And if he did, he would never take the pseudonym of

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Rahab, not if he knew anything at all about the Bible. Rahab was— No, I tell you what. Henry, get us the King James from the reference shelf. We might as well make sure we get the words exactly right."

"You mean you don't know the Bible by heart?" said Trumbull.

"I miss a word now and then, Tom," said Rubin loftily.

He took the Bible from Henry. "Thanks, Henry. —Now the only person named Rahab in the Bible was a harlot."

"She was?" said Gonzalo incredulously.

"That's right. Here it is—first verse of the second chapter of the Book of Joshua. *And Joshua the son of Nun sent out of Shittim two men to spy secretly, saying, Go view the land, even Jericho. And they went, and came into an harlot's house, named Rahab, and lodged there.*"

"And that's part of the parallelism," said Avalon thoughtfully "Is that what you think?"

"Of course. And that's why I think Jezebel and Rahab both apply to all the girls and should both be plural. Both Jezebel and Rahab are Biblical representatives of immoral women, and I take it that our note-writer, whoever he may be, conceives all the Miss Earth candidates to be just that."

"Are they?" asked Gonzalo "I mean, immoral."

Gordon smiled slightly "I won't guarantee their private lives, but I don't think they set any records for immorality They're young women, carefully selected to represent their countries. I doubt that anything really notorious would slip by the judges."

Avalon said, "When a Fundamentalist, who's a little past the bend, speaks of immorality, or when he starts calling some woman a Jezebel, there is no need, in my opinion, for the existence of real immorality It's probably purely subjective Any woman who rouses feelings of sensual excitement is immoral; and the one who does so most is the most immoral."

"You mean," said Gordon, swiveling his eyes toward Avalon, "that he's after the most beautiful one and aims to kill her."

Avalon shrugged. "What's beauty? He may be after the one *he* thinks is most beautiful, but what are his standards? It might not even be beauty in the literal sense. It might be that one of them reminds him of his dead mother or his childhood sweetheart. How can we tell?"

"All right," said Gordon "You may be quite correct in all you say, but it doesn't

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matter. Tell me who he's after; tell me who Rahab is, and we can worry about the motive afterwards."

Avalon shook his head. "I don't know that we can dismiss motive quite that easily, but in any case we won't get anywhere if we head down the wrong path. Despite what Manny says, I don't think there's any parallelism between Jezebel and Rahab."

"There certainly is," said Rubin, his jaw lifting.

"Where is it? To begin with, Jezebel wasn't a harlot. She was the Queen of Israel and there is no hint in the Bible that she was in any way immoral. It's just that she was an idolator and opposed the Yahvists; that is, those who worshipped Yahveh—or Jehovah, to use the more common but less accurate name."

Rubin said, "I'll explain it to you, if you want. Jezebel was the daughter of the King of Tyre, who was also a priest of Astarte. She was probably a priestess herself. As for Rahab, she was probably not a common harlot, but a priestess who participated in fertility rites. To the Israelites that was being a harlot."

Halsted said, "Not everybody has gone into the Bible as deeply as you have, Manny. The Bible calls Jezebel a queen and Rahab a harlot, and the average reader wouldn't go past that."

"But that's not the point I'm trying to make," said Avalon. "Jezebel, whatever her status, came to a bad end. She died in a palace coup and was eaten by dogs. Rahab however, came to a good end. She was saved after the fall of Jericho because she had kept the spies hidden. One can assume she was converted to the worship of the God of Israel and was no longer a harlot or a pagan priestess. In fact—Manny, let me have the Bible."

Avalon took it and turned the pages rapidly. "It's just at the opening of the Book of Matthew. Here it is: *And Salmon begat Booz of Rachab, and Booz begat Obed of Ruth, and Obed begat Jesse; and Jesse begat David the king.* There, that's the fifth and sixth verse of the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew. According to that, Rahab married a prominent Israelite and was the great-great-grandmother of King David and therefore a distant ancestress of Jesus himself. Having helped the Israelites take Jericho, having married an Israelite, and being the ancestress of David and Jesus, Rahab couldn't possibly be used as a symbol of immorality by any Fundamentalist."

The Bible passed from hand

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to hand, and Halsted said, "The name isn't spelled the same. It's 'Rachab' in Matthew."

Avalon said, "The New Testament was translated into English from the Greek; the Old Testament from the Hebrew. The transliterations aren't consistent. 'Booz' in the passage I just read is 'Boaz' in the Old Testament Book of Ruth."

"Besides," said Rubin, "in this case 'Rachab' is more nearly the correct spelling. The Hebrew letter that occurs in the middle of the name is correctly pronounced like the guttural German 'ch'."

"So if we are going to associate Rahab with one of the Miss Earth contestants," said Avalon, "we had better forget about the parallelism with Jezebel and look for something else."

"But what?" asked Drake.

"Don't worry." Avalon lifted an admonitory finger. "I have something in mind. Manny, isn't 'Rahab' used in the Bible as the poetic equivalent of Egypt?"

Rubin said excitedly, "Yes, you're right. It's not the same word in Hebrew. There the middle letter *is* an 'h.' Still it's the same word in English. Usually it's translated into 'pride' or 'might' or something like that, but it's left untranslated in at least one place.—Somewhere in the Psalms, I think."

He turned the pages and muttered, "I wish we had a Bible dictionary. That's something the club ought to buy and add to the reference shelf." Then, with his voice rising almost to a shout, he said, "Here it is! Fourth verse of the 87th Psalm: *I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me: behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia.*"

"How do you know that 'Rahab' means Egypt there?" asked Gonzalo.

"Because throughout Old Testament history the rival great powers were those in the Tigris-Euphrates valley and on the Nile. Babylon clearly typifies the former, so Rahab must typify the latter. There's no dispute there. Biblical scholars agree that 'Rahab' stands for Egypt."

"In that case," said Avalon, "I don't think we have to fall back on Henry. I suspect that it's Miss Egypt that our mysterious person is after."

Gordon said, "There's only one trouble."

"What's that, sir?"

"There isn't any Miss Egypt. —You see, the Miss Earth contest isn't as cut-and-dried as the Miss America contest. In the Miss America you have one

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contestant from each of the fifty states because foreign policy doesn't enter into it. In the Miss Earth contest, nations hostile to the United States, or those that look down on beauty contests as decadent, don't enter. This year no Arab state is represented. On the other hand, some nations are represented by more than one entry, each with a different name. Some years ago, I understand, there were two German beauties. The top winner went as Miss Germany, the second as Miss Bavaria."

Avalon looked distinctly annoyed. "If there's no Miss Egypt, then I don't know what 'Rahab' can mean."

"What does it mean in the Bible?" asked Gonzalo. "Why do they give that name to Egypt? There has to be some reason."

Rubin explained. "Egypt was a river kingdom and Rahab was associated with the waters. In fact, it was a mythological remnant of a pre-Israelite creation-myth. The land was viewed by the Sumerians as having been created from the sea. They visualized the sea as an enormous monster called Tiamat that had to be split in two so that the land could emerge from between the halves. In Babylonian mythology it was Marduk who killed Tiamat.

"The priestly writers of the first book of Genesis cleaned up the Babylonian myths and removed the polytheism, but they left traces. In the beginning, before the first day of creation, according to Chapter One, Verse Two of Genesis, *And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.* Well, the Hebrew word translated as 'the deep' is 'tehom,' and some commentators think that is a version of Tiamat and that this verse is all that is left of the cosmic struggle."

"That's pretty far-fetched," said Drake.

"I don't know. There are occasional verses in the Bible which seem to refer to the earlier and less sophisticated creation-myth. There's one toward the end of Isaiah, if I can find it. —I used to know where all these references are."

He turned pages back and forth feverishly, ignoring the small glass of brandy Henry had placed before him. Gordon sipped at his brandy and watched calmly. He made no attempt to stop Rubin or bring the discussion back to the point.

It was Trumbull who said, "Is this getting us anywhere?"

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But Rubin waved excitedly. "I've got it. I've got it. Listen to this: Isaiah, Chapter 51, Verse Nine; *Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old. Art thou not it that hath cut Rahab and wounded the dragon.* You see: 'cut Rahab' and 'wounded the dragon' is another example of parallelism. Rahab and the dragon are alternate expressions that symbolize the raging ocean that has to be defeated and split before dry land can be formed. Some commentators maintain this refers to Egypt and the division of the Red Sea, but in my opinion it is a version of the fight with Tiamat."

There was perspiration on Rubin's forehead and he kept waving his left hand for silence, even while his right hand continued to turn pages. "There are references to it in the Psalms, too. I can find them if you'll give me a minute. Ah, Psalm 89, Verse Ten: *Thou rulest the raging of the sea; when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them. Thou hast broken Rahab in pieces, as one that is slain.* And then another one, Psalm 74, Verses 13 and 14, *Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the head of leviathan in pieces.* Leviathan was another name for the primeval ocean."

Trumbull shouted, "Blast it, Manny, you're not a revivalist preacher any more. Where's this all getting us?"

Rubin looked up indignantly and closed the Bible. "If you'll let me talk, Tom," he said, with exaggerated dignity, "and curb your impulse to bellow, then I'll tell you."

He looked about impressively. "I now suspect that to the fellow who wrote this note, Rahab meant the raging power of the sea. Now what is the raging power of the sea today? Who controls the sea? The United States does. With our aircraft carriers, our nuclear submarines, our Polaris missiles, we have the power of Rahab. I think maybe he's after Miss United States."

"Is that so?" said Halsted. "The United States has been the predominant sea power only since World War Two. It hasn't had time to enter legend. It's Great Britain that's the ruler of the sea in song and story. 'Britannia rules the waves.' I vote for Miss Great Britain."

Gordon interposed. "There's no Miss Great Britain. There is a Miss England, though."

"All right, I vote for Miss England."

Drake said, "There's no way

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of getting into this man's head. Maybe he was just using the name to indicate his method of operation. Rubin said 'brakest the head' and 'broken in pieces' when he read those verses. Maybe the writer meant he was going to use a blunt instrument."

Rubin shook his head. "In one of the verses it was 'cut Rahab.'"

Gonzalo said, "If Rahab is an archopponent of God, the writer might be thinking of the Nazis. Why not Miss Germany?"

Henry said, "I beg your pardon, gentlemen."

Gordon looked up. "Ah, you have a suggestion, Henry?"

"Yes, I have, sir. Whether it's useful or not, I don't know.—You said, Mr. Gordon, that the rules are rather flexible in the Miss Earth contest as far as the nations represented are concerned. Some nations have no representatives, some have two or more under different names. You mentioned a Miss Germany and a Miss Bavaria, for instance."

"That's right," said Gordon.

"And you said there was no Miss Great Britain, but that there was a Miss England."

"Right again," said Gordon.

"Does the Miss England imply the presence of a Miss Scotland as well?"

"It does, as a matter of fact." Gordon's eyes narrowed. "And a Miss Ireland and Miss Northern Ireland, too."

Gonzalo brought both hands before him on the table. "I'll bet I know what Henry is driving at. If the writer of the note is Irish, he may be after Miss Northern Ireland. He would consider her as representing a political division that's a puppet of England, and England rules the waves and is Rahab."

Henry shook his head. "It's not as complicated as that, I think. I have always thought that all things being equal, the simplest explanation is best."

"Occam's razor," muttered Avalon.

"I must admit," said Henry, "I never heard of Rahab before, but Mr. Rubin's explanation was quite enlightening. If Rahab is a monster representing the sea, and if the monster is also called leviathan, and if leviathan is sometimes used as a name for an actual sea monster, and the largest that lives, why might not the writer be referring to Miss Wales?"

"Ah," said Gordon.

Henry turned to him. "Was that the answer, Mr. Gordon?"

Gordon said cautiously, "It's a possibility."

"No, Mr. Gordon," said Henry. "You know better than

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that. You came here to test me. How can you test me with a puzzle to which you don't know the answer?"

Gordon broke into a laugh. "You win again, Henry," he said. "Everything I told you is true enough, except that it happened last year. The person in question was caught. He had a knife in his hand, but he surrendered quietly and is now in a mental hospital. But he was quite incoherent. We could never be sure just what his motive was except that he was certain his victim was particularly wicked.

"The trouble was," Gordon went on, "we never did find out what Rahab meant. —But when we caught him he was making his way into the dressing room of Miss Wales. We should have had you last year, Henry. You're a remarkable detective.

"The Black Widowers are. They explore the problem; I only pick up what's left over," said Henry.

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a crime story by

EDMUND CRISPIN

It is hard to believe that more than ten years have elapsed since we've had the pleasure of publishing a story by Edmund Crispin—surely much too long a time to be deprived of his polished contributions to the literature of crime.

Here is a short-short that is one of Mr. Crispin's finest efforts in this difficult length—about a hired murderer, a real professional, hard, cold, impassive, whose instructions were simple and clear: "That's your job—to kill . . ."

THE PENCIL

by EDMUND CRISPIN

It was not until the third night that they came for Eliot. He had expected them sooner, and in his cold withdrawn fashion had resented and grown impatient at the delay—for although his tastes had never been luxurious, the squalid bedroom which he had rented in the Clerkenwell boarding-house irked him. Now, listening impassively to the creak of their furtive steps on the staircase, he glanced at his gun-metal wrist-watch and made certain necessary adjustments in the hidden thing that he carried on him. Then quite deliberately he turned his chair so that his back was toward the door.

His belated dive for his revolver, after they had crept up behind him, was convincing enough to draw a gasp from one of them before they pinioned his arms, thrusting a gun muzzle inexpertly at the back of his neck. Petty crooks, thought Eliot contemptuously as he feigned a struggle. And "petty crooks" again, as they searched him and hustled him down to the waiting car. Yet his scorn was not vainglorious. The hard knot into which his career of professional killing had twisted his emotions left no room even for that. Only once had Eliot killed on his own account—and that was when they had nearly

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caught him. He was not proposing to repeat the mistake.

It was a little after midnight and the narrow street was deserted. The big car moved off smoothly and quietly. Presently it stopped by an overgrown bomb site, blanched under the moon, and the blinds were drawn down. There they gagged Eliot, and blindfolded him, and tied his hands behind his back. When they found him submissive, their confidence perceptibly grew. Between them and Addison's lot, Eliot reflected as the car moved off again, there was little or nothing to choose: petty crooks all of them, petty warehouse thieves whose spheres of operation had happened to collide. That was why he was here.

He made no attempt to chart mentally the car's progress. He had not been asked to do that—and it was Eliot's great merit as a hired murderer that he was incurious, never going beyond the letter of his commission. Leaning back against the cushions, he reconsidered his instructions as the car purred on through London, through the night.

"Holden's people are getting to be a nuisance," Addison had said—Addison the young boss with his swank and his oiled hair and his Hollywood mannerisms. "But if Holden dies they'll fall to pieces. That's your job—to kill Holden."

Eliot had only nodded. Explanations bored him.

"But the trouble is," Addison had continued, "that we can't find Holden. We don't know where his hideout is. That means we've got to fix things so that they lead us to it themselves. My idea is to make you the bait." He had grinned. "Poisoned bait."

With that he had gone on to explain how Eliot was to be represented as a new and shaky recruit to the Addison mob; how it was to be made to seem that Eliot possessed information which Holden would do much to get. Eliot had listened to what concerned him directly and ignored the rest. It was thorough, certainly. They ought to fall for it.

And to judge from his present situation, they had . . .

It seemed a long drive. The only thing above all others that Holden's men wanted to avoid was the possibility of being followed, the possibility that he, Eliot, might pick up some clue to the hideout's whereabouts. So whatever route they were taking, it certainly wasn't the most direct.

At last they arrived. Eliot was pushed upstairs and through a door, was thrust

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roughly onto a bed. A bed, he thought: good. That meant Holden had only this one musty-smelling room. All the more chance, therefore, that the job would come off.

He let them hit him a few times before he talked: his boyhood had inured him to physical pain, and he was being well paid. Then he told them what they wanted to know—the story Addison had given him, the story with just enough truth in it to be convincing. Eliot enjoyed the acting: he was good at it. And they were at a disadvantage, of course, in that having left the blindfold on they were unable to watch his eyes.

In any case, Holden—who to judge from his voice was a nervous elderly Cockney—seemed satisfied. And Holden was the only one of them who mattered . . . Before long, Eliot knew, the police would get Holden, and Addison too, and their small-time wrangling for the best cribs would be done with for good and all. That, however, was of no consequence to Eliot. All he had to do was to say his lesson nicely and leave his visiting card and collect his fee.

And here it was at last: the expected, the inevitable offer. Yes, all right, Eliot said smoothly after a few moments of apparent hesitation; he didn't mind being their stool pigeon so long as they paid him enough. And they were swallowing that, too, telling him what they wanted him to find out about Addison's plans, sticking a cigarette between his bruised lips and lighting it for him. He almost laughed. They weren't taking off the blindfold, though: they didn't trust him enough for that. They were going to let him go, but in case he decided not to play ball with them, after all, they weren't risking his carrying away any important information . . .

Yes, they were going to let him go. This is it, Eliot thought. And delicately, as he lay sprawled on the bed, his fingers moved under the hem of his jacket, so that, hidden from his interrogators, something slim and smooth rolled out onto the bedclothes.

Fractionally he shifted his position, thrusting the object—to the limit that the rope round his wrists would allow—underneath the pillow. It was a nice little thing, and Eliot was sorry to lose it: in appearance, nothing more than an ordinary mechanical pencil, but with a time fuse inside it and a powerful explosive charge. Addison had told him that it was one of the many innocent-looking objects supplied to French

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saboteurs during the Occupation, to be deposited on the desks of German military commanders or in other such strategic places. And Eliot, who cared nothing for war but who was interested in any destructive weapon, had appreciated its potentialities. As a means of murder it was chancy, of course: this one might kill Holden, or on the other hand it might kill a cleaning woman making up the bed.

But that was none of Eliot's business. He was doing what he had been told to do, and whether it succeeded or not he was going to collect.

The return drive was like the first. At the bomb site the gag and bonds and blindfold were taken off, and presently Eliot was back at his lodginghouse door, in the gray light of early dawn, watching Holden's car drive rapidly away.

He mounted to his room, examined his damaged face without resentment in the mirror, and on impulse started to pack. Then, tiring suddenly, he lay down on the bed and slept.

The pencil had been set to explode at eight. . .

It was a quarter to eight when Eliot woke, and the full light had come. Finish packing first, he thought; then see Addison, report, and get paid off. The early editions of the evening papers would tell him, before he caught the boat train, whether Holden was dead or not . . .

So he was shifting the pillows, to make more room on the bed for his shabby suitcase, just as the clock of St. John's struck the hour.

And that was when he saw the pencil.

For a second he stared at it in simple incomprehension. Then understanding came. Of course, thought Eliot dully, of course! They weren't risking the secret of their precious hideout. This is where they brought me to, after driving me round and round the streets. This is where they questioned me—here in my own room!

Panic flooded him. He ran. From the bedside to the door was a distance of no more than three paces.

But the explosion had caught and killed him before his fingers even touched the doorknob.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

The time has come, perhaps, for Mr. Leonard Strang, the gnomelike little science teacher at Aldershot High School, to switch careers—to give up teaching (surely he's old enough for retirement, or if he isn't, he can take a sabbatical) and become a full-time private detective, or an unofficial consultant to the police. But we have a hunch that when the career chips are down, no one at Aldershot High School—not the principal or Mr. Strang's colleagues and, above all, not the students—will let the old science teacher go for at least another generation. In any event, long live double careers, especially if one of them is the science of detection.

In his newest case Mr. Strang confronts a dying message, and the message is as challenging and baffling as—well, as a never-before-attempted scientific experiment. . . .

MR. STRANG FOLLOWS THROUGH

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

The brutal and savage murder of Shirley Capehart in her own apartment early on a Monday morning shook the entire village of Aldershot. Within hours dozens of police cars cruised the streets, their steely-eyed occupants stopping often to question anyone who appeared even remotely suspicious. Young matrons, alone during the day, breathed easily only after their husbands had come home and house doors were safely locked. And the village's clergymen set about preparing sermons in which Aldershot was depicted as a modern-day Sodom or Gomorrah.

The town gossips, of course, had a field day. And out of the mass of misinformation that was passed along over back

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fences and through overworked telephone lines, a few facts emerged:

Miss Capehart, a girl in her early twenties, had been a substitute teacher in the Aldershot school system.

She had been murdered in her apartment in the Aldershot Arms some time between seven o'clock in the morning, when she had been called to take a substituting job, and eight, when the body was found.

The murder had been committed with a long knife or some other sharp, pointed weapon. She had been stabbed several times in the abdomen, and there were other cuts on her head and neck.

The girl's own pen had been used, presumably by the murderer, to print on the painted apartment wall a quotation which was quickly identified as coming from the 2nd Book of Kings: "Go, see now this cursed woman, and bury her."

Although there was some talk of a dying message that the girl herself had left, Aldershot's most astute gatherers of information were unable to confirm or deny this rumor.

At 3:30 on the day following the murder, Mr. Strang, Aldershot High School's venerable science teacher, entered the main office of the James K. Errington Elementary School, one of six in the village which annually sent their graduating eighth graders on to Mr. Strang and his fellow faculty members for the completion of their high-school education. He approached the secretary's desk and tipped his battered felt hat to Miss Dockett.

"Good afternoon," he said gently, nodding in the direction of the closed door of the principal's office. "I made an appointment with Mr. Hafgardt to take a look at those eighth-grade achievement tests in science. Just to get an idea of what kind of kids we'll be getting next year. Is he in?"

"He's in conference now," replied the secretary. "Something special came up. Would you care to wait, Mr. Strang?"

The teacher nodded. As he turned toward the row of chairs along one wall of the outer office he felt Miss Dockett pluck at the sleeve of his jacket.

"Mr. Strang," she whispered, "wasn't that awful about Miss Capehart? I mean, who could have done such a thing?"

"A madman from what I've heard," the teacher replied.

"You knew she was scheduled to be a substitute here yesterday, didn't you?" the secretary continued.

Before Mr. Strang could reply, a familiar voice boomed

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out from behind the closed door of the principal's office.

"Mr. Hafgardt, I don't give a damn about your reputation. There's been a murder committed and I intend to get to the bottom of it!"

Suddenly the office door banged back, and Tom Hafgardt stood in the doorway. A slender man in his early thirties, his face was white with rage.

"Out!" he barked, pointing. "I'm willing to cooperate with the police, but nobody's going to come into my office and boldly accuse me of murder!"

A tall heavy-set man wearing a tan overcoat and carrying a brief case appeared behind Hafgardt. "I didn't accuse you of anything," he said. "But we have reason to believe you know more than you're telling us. After all, you were the last one to speak to her. By your own admission you phoned to ask her to substitute. That was at seven yesterday morning. Less than an hour later. . .

The man's voice trailed off as he looked past Hafgardt at the gnomelike little science teacher. "What are you doing here, Mr. Strang?" he asked.

"As a teacher, Paul, I often find myself in school buildings," said Mr. Strang with a wry grin. "A better question might be what are you doing here?"

"You mean you know this imbecile, Leonard?" Hafgardt said. "Detective Roberts came here to grill me about the murder of Shirley Capehart. And of all the heavy-handed, dim-witted—"

"Oh, Paul's not as bad as all that," said Mr. Strang. "Perhaps as a mutual friend I could help."

From Hafgardt: "You can tell this idiot to get out of—"

From Roberts: "Either this guy will talk to me here or I'm gonna pull him in and—"

Mr. Strang's eyes flashed through black-rimmed glasses. He flung out an arm and his finger pointed to the doorway.

"Get back in that office, both of you," he snapped, biting off each word. He held his pose in stony silence.

Both the principal and the detective began to feel like schoolboys who had been caught in some mischief. With hangdog expressions they returned to the inner office. Mr. Strang followed, closing the door behind him.

"Now sit down," the teacher commanded, "and let's get to the bottom of this. First you, Tom."

Hafgardt flicked an angry glance at Roberts before beginning. "Sure, I called Shirley Capehart yesterday about taking a substituting job. One of

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the third-grade teachers had called in sick. But the lesson plans for the day were in perfect order, so I knew Shirley wouldn't have any trouble, even on such short notice."

"A nice easy day's pay for cute li'l Miss Capehart, eh?" said Roberts, with more than a tinge of sarcasm in his voice.

"As a matter of fact," continued Hafgardt, gritting his teeth and looking fixedly at Mr. Strang, "I also wanted Shirley to take another job today, substituting for Mrs. Bledsoe, our vocal music teacher. Mrs. Bledsoe keeps no lesson plans at all, and trying to get first and second graders to sing on key is anything but easy. In any case, when Shirley didn't appear here at school by eight o'clock yesterday morning I called her apartment again. The telephone was answered by this—this—" He jerked his thumb in Roberts' direction.

"A call was put in to the police a little before eight," Roberts admitted grudgingly. "It was from an Eileen Jenns, who has the apartment next to the Capehart girl's. She'd heard some scuffling coming from next door, but she didn't think much about it at the time—thought Miss Capehart was moving furniture around or something. Anyway, when she left her apartment she noticed the door to the Capehart apartment was open. She looked inside and saw the body. The officer said she was almost hysterical over the phone. The station called me at home, and I got right over there. I'd no sooner entered the apartment when the phone rang. It was Hafgardt calling."

"Umm. I see," said the teacher. "Tell me, Paul, what makes you think Tom Hafgardt knows any more about this case than he's already told you?"

The detective closed his mouth with an audible click and clutched his brief case tightly to his chest. "That's official police business," he muttered.

"I see," responded the teacher. He turned to Hafgardt. "Throw the fuzz out of your office, Tom. That's my advice. And don't say another word to him. There's no reason why you should cooperate."

"Hey, wait a minute, Mr. Strang!" cried the detective. "We've been friends for more than five years. You've even given me a hand on some of my cases. What's the big idea?"

"Paul," the teacher replied, "it's true you're my friend. But Tom here is both a friend and a colleague. And it seems to me you're taking too hard a line with him. You'd like him to be completely honest with you,

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but you refuse to do the same with him."

"I don't know what you're talking about," muttered Roberts.

"Oh, come on, Paul. You're not here just because Tom phoned Miss Capehart. You've got something on him, and from the way you're clutching that brief case I'd say it's in there."

"Anything in that case is official police business, Mr. Strang. I don't have to—"

"We can't force you to do a thing, Paul," said the teacher. "On the other hand, you can't force Mr. Hafgardt to give you his willing cooperation. But I was hoping we could handle this like reasonable men."

Roberts took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his perspiring face. "The lieutenant will kill me for this, but—well, okay."

Roberts opened the brief case and drew out a large glossy color photograph. "This is a shot of a page from a looseleaf notebook that was on the desk in Shirley Capehart's living room," he said. "I had it blown up to actual size. I think it'll answer all your questions."

The photo was exceptionally clear; even the horizontal blue lines on the paper were visible. On the page two wide red circles surrounded some penciled letters. Other blobs of red appeared elsewhere on the page.

"Those circles were drawn by Shirley Capehart in her own blood. We know that because there's a clear fingerprint at the base of that outer circle, and it matches the right index finger of the body. The way we figure it, after she'd been stabbed the first time she staggered to the desk and circled the printing on the page. It's pretty clear she wanted to draw our attention to it."

Mr. Strang took the photograph and examined the scrawled capital letters on the page:

T. OMHAF
EIL

The teacher nodded thoughtfully. "Paul's got a point, Tom," he said to the principal. "Those letters in the first line do seem to be spelling out your name."

"But I never—"

"On the other hand, Paul," the teacher went on, "there is that period and then a gap between the T and the other letters. How do you explain that?"

"I wish I could," answered the detective. "To be perfectly honest, Mr. Hafgardt isn't the only person this photo has made us suspicious of."

"Yes," nodded Mr. Strang. "The bottom line—EIL—might refer to Miss Capehart's neigh-

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bor. Eileen Jenns, I think you said her name was."

"Right. And then there's the third one."

"The third one? Who's that?"

"An old man who lives on the top floor of the Aldershot Arms—Anthony Olmhoff. He has a piano in his apartment and on a few occasions he has invited Shirley Capehart up to his place to play it."

Mr. Strang stroked his chin. "I see," he said thoughtfully.

"Well, I don't," said Hafgardt. "I know I didn't do it, but how do you figure this Olmhoff character might be the one you're looking for?"

"The diminutive of the name Anthony is Tony," Mr. Strang explained patiently, "the initial being T. and OMHAF just could be a misspelling of his last name."

"Not only that," added Roberts, "but Olmhoff was under the care of a psychiatrist a few years back. Acute depression." He glanced at Hafgardt. "Have you ever been to a shrink?" he asked.

"Certainly not!"

"Okay, take it easy. Going to one is no crime." Roberts flopped down into a swivel chair and leaned back, breathing a long sigh. "So there you have it, Mr. Strang," he said. "A clue left by a dying woman which might indicate any one of three people. And no other evidence—not an iota."

"And you're absolutely sure the murder was the work of a maniac?" asked Mr. Strang.

"No question about it. The living room of that apartment is a bloody mess, but nothing's missing. We even found forty-two dollars in a drawer of the desk. And for another thing, the medical examiner said some of the stab wounds had been made after death. Finally there's that writing on the wall."

"Paul, doesn't it seem odd that an otherwise normal person would suddenly go so berserk? I mean, wouldn't there be some previous history of mental illness?"

"We've already thought of that," said Roberts. He turned to the principal. "I don't mind telling you, Hafgardt, that in the past twenty-four hours we've gone over your life with a fine-tooth comb. And if it'll make you feel any better you seem to be about as normal as they come. But the same goes for Eileen Jenns. And Olmhoff too, except for that business with the psychiatrist."

"Paul?"

"Yeah, Mr. Strang."

"This problem intrigues me—to say nothing of the fact that I'll sleep better at night once

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the killer is caught. Is there any chance of my seeing the Capehart girl's apartment?"

Roberts shook his head firmly. "No way, Mr. Strang. Look, you're a pretty sharp old geezer—pardon—but nobody except the police gets in there until this case is solved."

"Then I guess I'll have to use the other way."

"Other way? What other way? Hey, Mr. Strang! Come back here! You can't—"

But the diminutive teacher had already left the office and was on his way out of the building.

At 4:30 the following afternoon Mr. Strang presented himself at the door of the Aldershot Arms and buzzed for admittance. The door was opened by the building's caretaker, a little cricket of a man with a prune-wrinkled face and watery blue eyes, who introduced himself as Timothy MacDonald.

"An' ye'd be Muster Strang, I'll wager," said MacDonald in a thick Scottish burr. "Miss Jenns said to be expecting you. Doon the hall there, then turn right. Number Nine."

As he passed the door to Apartment 7, Mr. Strang glanced at the seal over the keyhole and the notice stating that entrance was forbidden without police permission. Less than four days previously Shirley Capehart had been killed within a few feet of where he now stood.

He rang the bell of the next apartment. An eye appeared at a peephole in the door, then there was the sound of bolts being thrown back. He bowed stiffly as Eileen Jenns finally opened the door. She was a tall girl whose voluptuous body was surmounted by a rather homely face.

"I'm very grateful you could see me," said the teacher, placing his hat on a chair. "You do understand, I hope, that I'm in no way connected with the police."

"It's a good thing you telephoned first," Eileen replied. "After what happened I don't open my door to anybody unless I'm expecting them. And I did take the precaution of calling the high school and asking your principal what you looked like."

"Very wise," the teacher nodded. "Tell me, do all these apartments have the same layout? I mean rooms, closets, and so on?"

"Like they were stamped out with a cookie cutter," Eileen replied. She took the teacher through the living room and into the small kitchenette. "The bath's through there," she said, pointing to a door, "and

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there's the bedroom."

Mr. Strang walked by a cheap dressing table and peered through the bedroom window at the cans of rubbish in the alley behind the building. "Charming view," he said wryly. "You're sure Shirley Capehart's apartment is just like this one?"

"Her furniture's more expensive, and her walls are painted instead of wallpapered," the girl answered. "Aside from that, you can't tell one from the other."

"Just one more thing, Miss Jenns," said the teacher, stoking up his pipe and applying a match. "Did you hear anything at about the time Miss Capehart was—er—"

"Just some bumping around. I didn't think much of it at the time."

"Doesn't it seem odd that Miss Capehart didn't scream?"

"Not really. I asked the police about that. They said the shock of being stabbed might have made screaming impossible." She shivered slightly. "I don't like all this talk about killing," she said in a soft voice. "And the idea that I'm suspected makes my flesh crawl. I—I'm afraid."

For supper that evening Mrs. Mackey, Mr. Strang's landlady, treated the teacher to a Lucullan feast of pot roast, boiled potatoes, and tossed salad. She could just as easily have served a meal of rubber boots and hay. Mr. Strang's mind was not on food.

Later, in his room, the old teacher sat in his chair puffing at his pipe. The puzzle of Shirley Capehart's death circled through his mind like a mechanical rabbit at a dog track. He considered the quotation written on the wall. Jezebel—the "cursed woman." But Shirley Capehart was no Jezebel. Except in the demented mind of one person. But was it Eileen Jenns, Tom Hafgardt, or Anthony Olmhoff?

Idly he switched on the radio. A full symphony orchestra was playing an incongruous arrangement of *Row, Row, Row Your Boat.* He took a scratch pad from his desk and scrawled letters on it:

T. OMHAF
EIL

As the music on the radio changed to *Three Blind Mice*, Mr. Strang stroked a horizontal line at the bottom of the F. Now the upper row of letters read: T. OMHAE. Interesting, but of no help whatsoever.

"And now for an old favorite, known to us all," said the radio announcer. As the music began, Mr. Strang drew two more lines on the pad.

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All at once the hand holding the pencil began to tremble. The music boomed against the old teacher's ears, and he stared at the paper in front of him, his eyes wide.

"Gnathostomata!" he shouted, scuttling across the room to the telephone near his bed. After consulting the directory, he dialed the home of the village's sanitation commissioner and asked a single question.

After hearing the anwer, he hung up the receiver and made a hurried call to Detective Paul Roberts.

In her small apartment Eileen Jenns sat reading. It was eight o'clock according to her watch, but already it was dark outside. The dressing gown she was wearing rustled softly. She really shouldn't have bought it; it was much too impractical for a single girl. Still, it was a pleasure to wear, especially after taking off the severe starched uniform she wore at her job.

There was a soft knock at the door. "Who is it?" she called out. There was a muffled reply in a familiar voice. She turned the lock and opened the door wide.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, she felt herself spun viciously about. She opened her mouth wide, but before she could scream, a hand pressed tightly across it. "Jezebel," a voice whispered harshly in her ear. "Whore of Judah! You paint your face and look out at a window. Temptress. Even as Jehu had Jezebel slain, so will I slay you."

Something flashed in the air. A knife. Eileen steeled herself against the pain to come.

And then the hand was violently jerked from her mouth. She was free. Behind her there were scuffling sounds. She turned.

There were Detective Roberts and that funny little teacher, Mr. Strang. They each held one arm of the man struggling between them.

It was the caretaker of the Aldershot Arms—Timothy MacDonald.

Both hands of the clock at the station house were pointing straight up when Paul Roberts finally came through the doors from the rear of the building to confront a still-trembling Mr. Strang.

"MacDonald hasn't stopped ranting and raving since we brought him in," said the detective. "I don't know whether they'll ever get him calmed down, even with tranquilizers. By the way, I had his rooms searched. Seems he kept

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a diary. You ought to see it. Even Sigmund Freud would have had trouble figuring him out. We'll be able to make a murder case against him, although I think he'll beat the rap on the grounds of insanity."

He paused and considered the white-faced teacher. "Hey, you don't look so good. Sure you don't want me to drive you home?"

"I'll be all right, Paul. It's just that I'm too old for these last-minute rescues."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. But what was it that tipped you off, Mr. Strang? I mean, I wouldn't have figured MacDonald for the killer in a million years."

"Those letters in the notebook, Paul. They were the first thing. You see, they were written in pencil."

"So?"

"Does it seem logical to you that Shirley Capehart, after being stabbed, would write a cryptic message in pencil and then put the pencil down and circle it with her own blood?"

"No, I guess not, but—"

"Therefore, inference one: the letters, at least when Miss Capehart first wrote them, had nothing to do with the murder. It was only after she was stabbed that they became important in the case."

"Yeah, I see. But then what was that writing in the notebook?"

"She was a substitute teacher. And she'd just been called about taking two jobs—a third grade on Monday and primary vocal music the following day. Furthermore, while lesson plans had been prepared for the third grade, there were none in music. Now if Shirley Capehart had a few minutes, what would she probably have done with the time?"

"Do you mean that what she was writing in that notebook was what she was going to teach the music classes?"

Mr. Strang nodded, but the puzzled expression didn't leave the detective's face. "I still don't get it."

"It was that last line that threw me, Paul. EIL. But it must have happened this way." From his pocket Mr. Strang drew a small notebook. Turning to a blank page, he rapidly printed EI. Next he made a vertical line and then a short horizontal one to form an L.

"This is where she was interrupted—either by a knock at the door or the murderer's actual entrance into the apartment. You see, she never got to finish that last letter."

Quickly the teacher drew two more short horizontal lines, transforming the L into an E. "Now let me *finish* the line," he

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said, continuing to print.

Roberts took the page and read the letters on it. "E, I, E, I, O," he said slowly. "But what—Holy Saint Jude Thaddeus!"

"Sounds familiar, doesn't it?" said Mr. Strang. "The completed plan, if Shirley hadn't been interrupted, would have gone something like this." He jotted letters above the ones he'd already printed:

T. OMHAF
EIEIO

"And I can only think of one bit of music for primary students that would fit."

"O, M, H, A, F," said Roberts. "*Old MacDonald Had a Farm.* So that's how you knew it was the caretaker."

"Exactly."

"But what about that first T, Mr. Strang? Where does that fit in?"

"It probably stands for Tuesday, the day she was to teach the music classes."

"Just one more thing. What led you to believe Eileen Jenns might be in danger tonight?"

"The bedroom windows of both girls' apartments look out on that back alley where the rubbish cans are kept. Rubbish is collected on Mondays and Thursdays in that part of town, according to the commissioner of sanitation. What would be more normal than that MacDonald would be out there to see that everything was ready for collection? I'd imagine that if the girls were a little careless about pulling down their shades, he might have seen enough to arouse him."

"It all hangs together, all right. Only how come Shirley Capehart was killed in the morning and MacDonald came after Eileen Jenns at night?"

"That just shows that in one thing at least, Timothy MacDonald is absolutely normal."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"For the Monday collection, MacDonald had his choice of getting the cans ready the night before or doing it early in the morning. And like the rest of us, Timothy MacDonald didn't like to work on Sunday."

"Q"

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a *NEW* crime story by

RON GOULART

One of the most difficult 'tec types to write—the humorous crime story—what a famous mystery critic used to call "crime without tears." And this time it happened in full view of millions of people . . .

THE LAUGHING CHEF

by RON GOULART

You don't often see something like that on television. In fact, most people thought it was a stunt and didn't pay close attention. That's why there was some confusion in the news media about exactly what his last words were. But I know what he said.

Back in May I'd been over at the KBKJ-TV studios supervising the taping of three commercials for my ad agency's local auto-dealer account. For some reason the chrome trim on the left side of the demonstration car kept falling off every time the announcer patted the front fender affectionately. After thirteen takes we took a break and I went over to the coffee machine.

Donny Sundell was there, biting nicks in the rim of his paper coffee cup and making angry noises. Donny was just 35, a short stalky man, moderately rumpled. He wrote continuity for two of KBKJ's live shows. "Argh," he said by way of greeting.

"Which show is it this time? The Waltz Hour or The Laughing Chef?" I asked him as I stuck a coin in the machine.

Nothing happened. Donny made a groaning noise and whacked the brown mechanism with his free fist and it commenced working again. He said, "You've known me for six years. Do I have a sense of humor?"

"No."

Donny nodded and bit at his

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cup again. "I guess not. Well, if I did I couldn't write this stuff, could I?"

"What happened now?"

"He told me he cooked the pig."

"Who told you? And what pig?"

"Well, who would tell me something so stupid? Bob Lorenzo, of course. The Laughing Chef himself," said Donny, rumpling himself further. "Don't you ever watch The Waltz Hour?"

"Not unless we have a commercial spot on it. Oh, you mean the pig they use on that show."

"That pig, yes. The pig that Ole holds when he does the comedy routine with Dick," said Donny. He bit too much out of the cup and coffee began to trickle down his hand and onto the sleeve of his cardigan. "Lorenzo told me he'd cooked it and stuck an apple in its mouth and could I write a new opening for this afternoon's show. A closeup of the pig and then pull back to show today's audience panel seated around the table smacking their lips."

"You believed him?"

"I phoned eight pet shops trying to get a new pig."

"Even if he did cook it, that's Ole's problem."

"Ole doesn't care. If the pig's missing he'll go out holding a cocker spaniel. He told me so. How can he make pig jokes with a cocker spaniel?"

"Ole was kidding you too, probably."

Donny threw his leaking coffee cup away and wiped himself off with paper napkins. "I suppose so. Well, how are you and your wife? Her foot feeling better?"

"What foot?"

"I don't know. Which one did she break skiing?"

"Neither. She doesn't ski. Tennis is her sport."

Donny smacked the coffee machine. He grabbed his fresh cup out with such force that it sloshed coffee across the front of him. "Gee, did I fall for another one?"

"Lorenzo again?"

"When we saw you go by this morning he told me about her foot," said Donny. "I gave him a dollar to go buy your wife a funny get-well card."

"She'll appreciate the thought," I said. "You and Marjorie ought to come over for dinner sometime. You haven't even been to our new place in the Valley."

"Oh, Marjorie," he said. "I don't know. Marjorie and I aren't getting along so well these days. Listen, you know Marjorie. Do you think she could be—"

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"Be what?"

"You know, having an affair. Seeing someone else."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. I asked her and she said she was, but you know how everybody likes to kid me." He sighed and drank what was left of his coffee.

The assistant floorman on our commercials came to tell me they'd found a glue which would make the chrome stay on so long as the announcer didn't pat the car too hard and I said goodbye to Donny and went back to work.

I had to fly to San Francisco the next week to scout locations for a beer commercial that our advertising agency was going to shoot. The story board called for a Swedish model to come floating in to shore on a beer barrel and there was too much oil in the ocean around Los Angeles. While I was away Donny got even more unsettled by the Laughing Chef.

He told me later what happened. Before one show Lorenzo said that one of the ladies picked for that day's panel was his ex-wife. Lorenzo didn't mind having her on the show but he thought it would be dangerous to go ahead with the recipe of the day, since it had been their favorite dish when they were married.

Donny didn't think to ask how nesselrode pie came to be the favorite romantic dish of a young married couple. He ran into his tiny KBKJ office and rewrote the first half of the show in eighteen minutes. When he got back into the control booth he noticed the panel was made up of two middle-aged men, a 70-year-old grandmother, and a teen-age bride.

Then Lorenzo began hinting that he was the man Donny's wife was seeing. He'd hand Donny folded notes and say, "Here's that bouillabaisse recipe Marj asked me for." When Donny's curiosity prompted him to unfold the sheet of paper he found it read: "Every moment away from you is an agonizing eternity. I fling a thousand burning kisses at your petite little feet."

Having no sense of humor, Donny thought the Laughing Chef might actually express himself that way. When he took off from work early, drove home doing 80 on the freeway, and flung the love note at his wife, she said, "I wish you wouldn't open my mail, Don." She liked to kid him, too.

I saw all three of them about a month later. I'd been in New York talking to a client of ours who wanted to film his next two support-hose commercials

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in front of the fountain he'd recently donated to his home-town of Yonkers. I was tired when I got back home to Los Angeles and didn't much feel like attending this particular party. But the host was an actor we were trying to talk into doing a testimonial for a dental-plate cleanser. So far he liked the fee we'd offered but he didn't know if he was quite ready to admit that he wore false teeth.

Lorenzo was in the big kitchen, helping with a fondue. He was a tall man in his late thirties, very lean and bony and with short-cropped sandy hair. He had the kind of mustache that British actors used to wear in India-army movies. Marjorie Sundell, a frail but pretty blonde, was with him. I located Donny outside, next to the pool, nibbling at the rim of his cocktail glass.

"You shouldn't eat those," I told him.

"Things are terrible," he said. "How's your wife?"

"Fine. Home with the kids. Bobo's got a touch of the flu."

"Which one is Bobo, the girl?"

"We have two boys."

Donny rubbed his low forehead. "Listen, I know what they're up to. Maybe I don't have much of a sense of humor, but this I've figured out." The glass almost cracked under his nibbling.

"You mean Marjorie and Lorenzo?"

"Yes. I know what they're up to. Do you read much?"

"Only nonfiction. I never seem to—what's that got to do with anything?"

"Poe," said Donny. "Edgar Allan Poe. The old 'purloined letter' gimmick. Put something right out in the open and nobody will see it."

"Police procedures have changed a lot since Poe's day," I said. "I don't think that would work any more."

"Of course it doesn't work. Which is how come I'm onto it." He threw his glass into the pool angrily. "Listen, if you were having an affair with my wife, what would *you* do?"

"The same thing anybody does when they're having an affair."

"Exactly. You'd be sneaky. You'd go to out-of-the-way motels, sign false names, make phone calls only at certain hours, dine in the dark corners of shadowy restaurants. Wouldn't you?"

I said, "Look, Donny, you've got to stop paying so much attention to Lorenzo. His reputation calls for him to joke a lot. After all, he's the Laughing Chef. I hear his show is likely to go into syndication

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any time now. You've got to stop letting him bother you."

"So he comes right out in the open, don't you see? 'Ha, ha, I'm seeing your wife,' " said Donny. "If I get mad they pretend it's all a joke. It's a perfect coverup. Diabolical. Worthy of Poe."

"Try to ignore him. If the show does go into syndication you'll get a percentage. Maybe you won't have to turn out so much copy then. You can drop The Waltz Hour."

"I'd rather stick with Ole and his pig."

Lorenzo came hurrying over, excusing his way through the crowd of some 50 guests. His face was somber, his mustache turned down. "Better come quickly, Don," he said in his affable voice. "Marj's had a little accident."

Donny jumped to his feet. "What's wrong?"

"She cut her hand helping me slice French bread."

"Damn," said Donny.

I caught his arm while saying to Lorenzo, "Why don't you stop for a while. Quit pulling this stuff on him."

"Doesn't he know when I'm kidding and when I'm not? She really is cut," insisted Lorenzo. "She'll have to go to a doctor. There's one half a mile down the hill."

Donny tugged free and went running back inside the house.

It turned out that Marjorie really had been injured and needed five stitches. It also turned out she was having an affair with Lorenzo, and Donny was right about some of the joking being a coverup. I don't know if Donny ever learned for sure that Marjorie was meeting the Laughing Chef. My wife heard about it from a girl she used to model with who happened to see Donny's wife and Lorenzo in the dark corner of a shadowy restaurant in Santa Monica.

I never saw Donny again after that party—that is, not in person. So I don't know much of what went on in the weeks that followed. I'm sure the Laughing Chef kept trying to play new jokes and Donny grew more and more upset.

I had to spend almost three weeks in the East. Mostly in Cape Cod trying to sober up a major novelist who was going to write us a series of prose poems to be used in magazine ads for our beer account. Right after I returned to Los Angeles I came down with the flu. After a day in bed I didn't feel like reading any more, not even nonfiction. So I decided to watch daytime television. Which is how I happened to see the whole thing happen, live.

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Some of the background I didn't learn about until later, from the director of The Laughing Chef show and one of the cameramen. Apparently what happened was that a few minutes before that afternoon's show one of the two men on the audience panel had a mild heart attack. They got him off the stage barely six minutes before the show was scheduled to go on. There wasn't time to pick someone new, brief him, and get him to sign the various releases and disclaimers.

So Donny tore off the cardigan he worked in and hustled into the floorman's sports coat, which was almost his size. They did a quick makeup job and when Lorenzo came strolling into the kitchen set, giving his characteristic opening laugh, Donny was sitting at the kitchen table with the rest of the panel of taste testers and kitchen helpers.

I propped another pillow behind myself and leaned forward when I recognized Donny. He was next to a retired insurance salesman from Altadena and a 70-year-old grandmother with a birthday orchid in her hair. A plump blonde visiting housewife from Michigan rounded out the group.

"Ah, ha," said the Laughing Chef. "We have a particularly hungry-looking panel today, don't we, ladies? All looking like first-class gourmets to me. Indeed, the young fellow there in the rumpled sports coat might even be a gourmand, ha, ha!

"Now, first things first, ladies. The young lady there in the lovely flowered print dress. You can help us get under way. We're making stuffed flank steak today, ladies. Ah, yes, I hear you murmuring in anticipation. Delicious, isn't it? And not really difficult to prepare when you know what you're about."

Lorenzo then interviewed the Michigan housewife and gave her a knife from the rack over his stove. He put her to chopping parsley for the stuffing.

Next he gave the other panelists kitchen chores, saving Donny for last. On the kitchen stove a pot of something was simmering. "Now, ladies, you know some things are not laughing matters with me. If you want to run a first-class kitchen, you must observe certain rules. One of which is, you must have a superb stock at all times. Stock, remember—don't you dare call it soup! We've had this simmering, ever so gently, since a few moments before we joined you today, ladies. I'm going to invite this

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personable young gentleman in the loose jacket to sample our stock and then lend me a hand in our next step."

Donny hesitated, but he got up and joined Lorenzo at the stove. The camera came in for a tight two-shot. After a few general questions the Laughing Chef selected a ladle and dipped it into the steaming stock pot.

"We'll allow this a little minute to cool, ladies, before we get this gentleman's honest opinion of its taste."

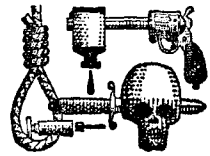
Lorenzo laughed while he held the spoonful of stock and waited for it to cool. "Ready now and a real delight, I'll wager." He thrust the spoon into Donny's mouth.

After Donny had swallowed, the Laughing Chef turned his back to the camera for a few seconds and whispered something in Donny's ear. Two days later I found out that he had murmured, "Now your wife is mine. I just fed you a fatal dose of an untraceable slow-acting poison."

Lorenzo moved around and faced the camera, grinning, "Well, how did that taste, Mr. Sundell?"

Donny stared at him for a full five seconds. Then he made an angry noise. He ran over and grabbed the knife away from the young housewife. He groaned once, jumped at Lorenzo, and stabbed the knife into Lorenzo's chest.

The Laughing Chef rotated half around, murmured something, and fell dead. Not everyone caught what Lorenzo said, but I did. He said, "My God, don't you ever know when I'm kidding?"



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another GIDEON "inspiration" by

J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

first publication in the United States

Gideon, Commander of the C.I.D. (the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard), liked to walk through London's parks. When he saw the vandalism of the flowerbeds, he put his staff to work on the problem. Inspector Lemaitre grumbled: "To hear him talk you'd think the flowers were made of gold!"...

GIDEON AND THE PARK VANDAL

by J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

George Gideon seldom had time to walk through London's parks during the week, but whenever he went to his office at New Scotland Yard on a Sunday he would try to leave in time to walk through them.

On a Sunday in August, when the air was close and humid, he had to go to talk to a South European suspected of exceeding certain diplomatic privileges. It wasn't a serious case. Glad rather than sorry, because he was never happy about treading on international toes, he walked across the hard courtyard of Scotland Yard.

"I'm going your way, George," a friend remarked. "Like a lift?"

"Just drop me in Birdcage Walk," said Gideon.

"Don't want to get home in time to slice the runner beans. I know," said the friend waggishly.

Gideon walked at a steady pace through St. James's Park.

He noticed two men in shirt sleeves standing by a flowerbed, which looked as if a dozen dogs had chosen it for a battlefield. Petals in a dozen colors were

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strewn all over the rich dark earth. Stalks were broken and trampled.

Gideon walked out of St. James's, strode in front of Buckingham Palace, crossed Green Park near the big new flyover work, then went into Hyde Park.

He almost outpaced some of the children on ponies along Rotten Row, reached Kensington Gardens, saw a taxi, and became extravagant.

"I'm glad you're back early, dear," his wife Kate said. "You can do the runner beans."

Next morning, glancing through the newspapers at breakfast, he read: VANDAL IN ST. JAMES'S PARK.

According to the newspaper, several flowerbeds in some of London's parks had been ruined lately—and it was obviously the work of a vandal using a spade.

"Yes, I knew about it," said his second in command at the Yard, Superintendent Lemaitre. "Blooming shame, but there's no need for you to worry about it, George. You've got too much on your plate already."

"Wouldn't like to go and have a word with all the park superintendents, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't! Dammit, we've got two murder inquiries on our doorstep, two bank raid jobs with fifty thousand quid gone between 'em, seven jewel robberies, four smash-and-grabs, and—"

"All the rest. I know," said Gideon. "Is McKinley back on duty?"

"Started this morning. He'll be a bit slow for a bit."

McKinley had been severely injured by a car while trying to stop runaway thieves.

"Tell him to go round and see the park superintendents. It will start his mind working."

To Ian McKinley, enthusiasm was not necessary in police work. He had a stern sense of duty—hence his bravery—and gave his full attention to whatever job was in hand.

Walking briskly on another muggy morning, he first inspected the three flowerbeds in St. James's Park which had been vandalized. He made lists of the flowers dug up and ruined, and solemnly noted the fertilizers needed in the different beds.

Then he asked questions.

"Were any footprints found near the beds?"

It was nothing but a mass of footprints.

"Was there any indication of the time of the vandalism?"

After dark—which presumably meant between about ten o'clock and half-past four next morning.

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"Were there any special marks of a spade, now?" inquired McKinley. "Would you be able to tell me what kind of garden tool was used?"

"Looked to me like a child's beach spade," he was told.

With all this noted, McKinley went back to the office at the Yard which he shared with four other Chief Inspectors, and put in calls to the superintendents of all the other Central London parks. Soon his details of the vandalism grew; over the past week the score was:

Hyde Park	7 lots of damage
Green Park	2 lots of damage
Kensington Gardens	4 lots of damage
Embankment Gardens	3 lots of damage

McKinley reported this to Lemaitre.

"Sounds like someone who's a bit loco to me," said Lemaitre. "Listen, Mac, go and check again, will you? I don't want Gee-Gee Gideon detailing half a dozen chaps on this job. To hear him talk you'd think the flowers were made of gold!"

"I must admit they're very beautiful," said McKinley.

He had another idea—that the gardens in some of London's squares might be suffering from the same kind of vandalism. He decided to find out by visiting them, but discovered no evidence.

"It all happens in the parks," McKinley duly reported to Lemaitre.

This was a week after *Gideon's first inquiry.*

McKinley was by then feeling thoroughly fit, a little impatient for "real" work.

Lemaitre was anxious, because the Yard was working under great pressure, and the holiday season was no easier to cope with at the Yard than at any large office.

If Gideon decided that the park vandal must be caught it would be the last straw.

Lemaitre prepared all his arguments in advance.

"The truth is, George, it's some poor old coot who—"

"One of these days you'll jump to a conclusion and land yourself bang in the middle of Queer Street," said Gideon. "Have you studied this list of McKinley's?"

"Studied it? I live in a flat, remember? I don't want to know all about fertilizers."

"Look at the dates," said Gideon. He read out the dates, while poking a finger at each.

Scowling, Lemaitre repeated them one after another, then went on in the same gloomy tone, "What's that got to do

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with it? Night of the full moon or something? I—*help!*"

"Bell ringing?" asked Gideon.

"That—that's unbelievable!" Lemaitre gasped. "It always happens the night *after* one of the jewel robberies. Cor strike a light. You don't think—"

"We're after a jewel thief who works frequently," Gideon said. "We've picked up several known thieves on the night a job's been done, and they haven't had any of the hot stuff on them, so we couldn't do a thing. Take another look at that list, Lem."

Lemaitre was eager. Like Gideon he knew by heart the addresses from which the jewels had been stolen, and he scanned McKinley's list before saying, "Fits in perfectly, George. The St. James's Park garden flowerbeds get dug up after Westminster robberies. The Hyde Park ones follow Piccadilly jobs. The Kensington Garden ones—"

"We had better have a special watch kept on those parks, hadn't we?" Gideon said mildly. "This chap works so often, we shouldn't have long to wait. Put McKinley in charge."

McKinley, not one whit abashed by the fact that he had not noticed these remarkable coincidences, laid on a thoroughly efficient job.

None of the park superintendents or the park keepers knew about this.

By good luck McKinley himself was watching some of the flowerbeds in Hyde Park three nights later when a man walked in the darkness across the grass, making little sound, then went to the back of a flowerbed where he could hardly be noticed, and set to work with a spade.

McKinley and a second Yard man crept nearer. They could hear the sound of the man digging, and soon heard his heavy breathing. He was not tossing the soil all over the place, but digging very carefully.

After a while the police made out the shape of his body as he bent down to bury something in the hole he had dug.

McKinley flashed on a light. A short pale-faced man, crouching and actually holding a plastic bag poised over the hole, seemed to be struck dumb.

McKinley approached him from one side, and the second Yard man from the other.

"Mind if I have a look at that neat hole you're making?" inquired McKinley. "You wouldn't be burying a bone now, would you?"

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The man straightened up, hurled the bag and beach spade into McKinley's face, and turned and raced across the grass.

McKinley put a whistle to his lips on the instant. The blast shrilled out. Policemen at other vantage points sprang up, beams of light shot out, lighting up the running man.

He dodged this way and that, desperately, then banged into a tree and almost stunned himself. McKinley, meanwhile, dipped into the plastic bag. . .

"It was Charles Race," Lemaitre told Gideon. "We had questioned him after three of the robberies, and he always got away with it because we hadn't anything on him. Know what, George? He carried a clean pair of shoes in his pockets, and changed after digging, so no one noticed the soil on his shoes.

"Once he was sure he was safe he went back for the stuff. He always planted it very carefully, hardly disturbed a flower, but when he went back for it he was in a hurry to get away, and didn't care how he left the beds. Wonder how long he would have gone scot-free?"

"I wonder," echoed George Gideon dryly.

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a *NEW* non-crime story by

JACOB HAY

*How in the name of Saint Edgar can we describe this story or justify its inclusion in a detective-mystery magazine? **Well,** dear reader, we won't even try. Either you'll love it, **and** chuckle deep, or you'll hate it and want to write a scathing letter to the Editor. Naturally, we hope you'll chuckle—better still, laugh out loud; if you don't, please be forbearing. Spare the Editor, and consider his decision to publish this story a wild impulse, the kind he rarely succumbs to. Nevertheless, you'll have to admit, this is the damnedest story!*

STOLTZFUSS' REVENGE

by JACOB HAY

Isaac Stoltzfuss had seen many changes and put up with much since his boyhood on the Stoltzfuss family farm, which lies roughly a dozen miles to the east of the prosperous city of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Being a good Amishman, he had managed to avoid many of the perils of mid-Twentieth Century life, including electricity and the internal combustion engine.

He had endured stoically the indignities of the tourist invasion of the Pennsylvania Dutch country which mounted from a trickle to a torrent in the years following World War II; had seen himself and his coreligionists reduced to quaint, cast-iron figurines, and their dialect mocked in untold tons of quaint, cast-iron trivets that said, "Bump. It don't bell," and "We grow too soon old und too late schmart." He, his beard, his horse and his buggy and his wife and his family had suffered through ten thousand surreptitious snapshots, most of them in front of the bank at Intercourse, Pa.

But the Russian satellite, as

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described in the pages of the Lancaster *New Era*, was just too much.

According to the *New Era*'s story, the satellite in its heavenly orbit passed directly over Lancaster County, flying west to east, roughly once every week, taking aerial photographs of the ground as it hurtled along. And so excellent was the definition of the photographs that a skilled photo-interpreter could even distinguish an automobile speeding along a highway.

Tourists and their myriad cameras could be borne, and if you spotted them in time you could always duck your head beneath your broad-brimmed black hat. But how could you avoid having a graven image, so sternly forbidden by Amish doctrine, made of yourself by a robot photographer in Space?

You couldn't, and Heaven only knew how many graven images of Isaac Stoltzfuss and his family the Russians had already accumulated in their files.

The situation was intolerable and insoluble.

Isaac had gone to the trouble of visiting the *New Era*'s office in Lancaster, and there the editor had assured him that the information came direct from NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. No, the editor could not say whether the Russian satellite flew directly over the Stoltzfuss farm, but since it was reported to photograph a strip of ground some 100 miles across, the chances were that Isaac's farm was in the pictures.

And no, the editor could not answer Isaac's angry question as to why the United States did not shoot this intruder out of the skies, but he did go so far as to surmise that it might be that if we did it to one of theirs, they might do the same thing to one of ours. This served only to buttress Isaac's inborn conviction that if God had wanted man to fly He would have given him wings, but did nothing to eliminate the graven-image problem.

Now those of the Amish persuasion are stout believers in the teachings and admonitions of the Old Testament, and while they cleave to the ways of peace they do not reject out of hand the doctrine of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, ill though it accords with the idea of turning the other cheek.

Isaac discussed the problem with his neighbor, Aaron Detweiler, who had not read the newspaper account of the satellite, but who was equally outraged. Aaron Detweiler suggested that they consult the pages of *Baer's Almanack*,

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which is published in Lancaster and is the county's lay Bible, but withdrew his proposal when Isaac pointed out that with all these new satellites flying around the Heavens, no almanack, not even *Baer's*, could any longer be considered reliable. In the end Aaron declared that since there was no possible way for Isaac to secure an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the only feasible alternative was to turn the other cheek. This, however, failed to satisfy Isaac.

"No, by Gott!" he exclaimed angrily, taking the Lord's name in vain for the first time in more than two decades. "You chust mind wunst, Aaron Detweiler, I'll think of something."

There was another annoying aspect to the satellite's existence. At his father's knee Isaac had learned to read the sky as a routine part of his day-to-day farming operations. A long shrewd look at the sky would tell him when to plant or when to harvest, when to hitch up the buggy for a trip to town, or when to leave it in the barn. This he could no longer do with a clear conscience. Before he had known about the satellite, any graven images it may have made of him were without his knowledge and could not, therefore, be considered sinful. But now he *knew*, and from nere on in, any graven images could and certainly would be set down in the Heavenly books against him.

For a few days Isaac tried looking at the sky's reflection in a mirror nailed to the side of his corn crib, but it just wasn't the same, and on the fifth day he had hitched up his buggy and was halfway to Blue Ball when he ran into a cloudburst.

On the sixth day Isaac acted. He did not tell his wife of a quarter of a century, Rebecca, what he had in mind. Instead he said simply, "I'll be in the south pasture for a spell."

Then he went out to his vast red barn and harnessed Peter, Paul, Luke, and Mark, four of the finest Percherons in all Lancaster County, to his gang plow and set out for the south pasture, a three-acre strip of the least fertile land on his farm, for all that it was admirably level.

It took Isaac the best part of an hour, for he was a notably careful plowman and enjoyed a considerable reputation for the arrow straightness of his furrows and the skilled curves of his contours. When he finished he paused in his labors, looked upon what he had wrought, and found it good. The long vertical and the two horizontals, the lower one shorter than the higher one, covered about one-

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third of the first acres, just about the right size for the job at hand.

This done, he took his reins once again in hand and, urging Peter, Paul, Luke, and Mark forward with a cheery grunt—for his heart was joyful in his task—Isaac guided them and the plow into the first of two long verticals, side by side, the lower ends of which he proceeded to connect with a deftly executed curve.

There followed a great sweeping curve, covering yet another third of an acre by itself, and this in turn was followed by another long vertical, to which were joined two diagonals, one slightly longer than the other. That took care of K and the rest of the morning.

Having got the hang of the technique, Isaac finished off his giant YOU well before Rebecca rang the farmhouse bell summoning him to supper—in time, in fact, for Isaac to climb a tall maple tree at the western end of the south pasture to insure that he hadn't misspelled anything. He hadn't. His message was brief and to the point, and would probably lose little in translation.

Apart from Isaac, the first person to espy his handiwork was the captain of Trans-Pennsylvania Airlines Flight 102, daily from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. For the first time in an unblemished career, the captain violated standard operating procedures to turn his plane in a tight circle over Isaac's south pasture so that his second-in-command might verify his improbable sighting.

"Well, I'll be damned!" was the second pilot's immediate reaction to the succinct direction plowed into the rich farmland. "Some crazy guy must be really mad."

Not anger, but rather a great inner peace filled Isaac Stoltzfuss as he sat down to Rebecca's vast dinner that evening.

Wishing to maintain his record without blemish, the captain of Flight 102 did not mention Isaac's message in his routine flight report, since to have done so would have been to risk immediate groundings for psychiatric examination and possibly the end of an otherwise brilliant career.

The captain of Trans-Pennsylvania's morning Flight 101 was cut from a different bolt of cloth, as it were, and saw his duty clear the following day. But even he could not bring himself to put down Isaac's exact words. Instead he wrote, "There is an obscenity in a field approximately ten miles due east of Lancaster, Pa." He, of course, was immediately

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grounded for psychiatric examination and was later allowed to resign.

Three days afterward another cloudburst struck Lancaster County, and in a trice Isaac's prodigious labor was undone, washed away by the force of the rain.

The second time, his technique perfected, Isaac plowed his message in German script which had the effect of giving it a well-nigh Biblical force, like the wrathful commandment of an Old Testament prophet.

And still Rebecca did not know. Nor did any of Isaac's neighbors, since the south pasture lay well within the boundaries of his farm and in sight of no road or house.

But the arm of the FAA, the Federal Aviation Administration (or perhaps it was the CAB, the Civil Aeronautics Board) is long, and in due course the report of the Trans-Pennsylvania captain of Flight 101, with its curious notation, reached official hands. The consequence was an aerial inspection by a team of government experts whose members were thus enabled to see exactly what, presumably, the Russian satellite was able to see.

The question was then raised as to why none of the passengers aboard the Trans-Pennsylvania planes that flew the skylane over the Stoltzfuss farm had seen Isaac's exhortation, and a check of the flight logs disclosed that Trans-Pennsylvania's planes transited the farm at precisely the time when the stewardesses were serving mid-morning or mid-afternoon snacks to their passengers.

Returning to Washington, the inspection team produced their eyewitness reports, confirmed by photographs.

The aerial inspection was followed by one on the ground, at which time it was discovered that Isaac's message was absolutely invisible at ground level. It looked, in point of fact, pretty much like any other plowed field. Isaac, who had cheerfully accompanied the inspectors (he had explained them away to Rebecca as representatives of the Department of Agriculture), showed them how to read it by climbing the maple tree. For this inspection the team had been augmented by a government attorney who had been raised on a farm in Iowa.

"Neatest damned furrows I've ever seen," declared the attorney when he had climbed down from the tree. "And, gentlemen, the fact is that I couldn't find anything anywhere that prohibits a man from dirty plowing. If Mr. Stoltzfuss here wants to plow

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'The President Is a Horse's Bottom' in his pasture, there isn't a law I know of that says he can't."

"That's real nice to know already," said Isaac, "but I'd never let them Russians know how I feel still." This remark necessitated his explaining why he had plowed his message to begin with.

"I'll say this for you, Stoltzfuss," said the attorney, deeply moved at the conclusion of Isaac's indignant explanation, "you may be crazy, but you're my kind of patriot."

Inevitably, such is the sad state of security in the nation's capital, word of the inspection team's confidential final report, which recommended only that Trans-Pennsylvania's Philadelphia-Pittsburgh flight path should be rerouted some miles to the north, was leaked to the press, and for some weeks after a flotilla of private planes, hired by major newspapers, magazines, and news syndicates, foreign and domestic, zoomed over Isaac's farm, invariably buzzing the south pasture for close-up shots, none of which, of course, was suitable for reproduction in publications intended for family reading.

Even in print, Isaac's message could not be repeated; it could only be hinted at in euphemism.

Having offered his explanation to the only people who counted, Isaac resolutely refused to discuss the matter further with the press, and was much dismayed by all the unwelcome attention and publicity he had engendered. He was further downcast by the furious tongue lashing he received from Rebecca when she discovered the two words he had plowed, for she held strong views on the impiety of foul language and the sanctity of procreation.

Matters were still further exacerbated when the Stoltzfuss farm was swamped by an insatiable horde of curious sightseers, and the bark of the maple tree overlooking the message was swiftly worn away by eager climbers. The ultimate indignity, as Isaac saw it, came in the form of a citation from a group of noted New York artists and intellectuals who described Isaac's message as the finest work of earth sculpture produced during the year.

In the end Isaac's Amish friends threatened him with the dreadful punishment known as "shunning" unless the offending words were removed from his property. Shunned, Isaac would be, in effect, a living corpse, a sinner past redemption. So Isaac hitched Peter, Paul, Mark, and Luke to his

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gang plow and went out to the south pasture to erase his words once and for all time.

It is highly unlikely that Isaac ever learned that a few months later a team of photo-interpreters from the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), examining the results of an American spy satellite that had passed over, among other places, a Soviet tracking station some miles north of Irkutsh, plainly saw, trampled in the form of enormous Cyrillic letters into the virgin Siberian snow, the Russian equivalent of "Same to you, fella."

Those best adapted to survive

THE ORIGIN OF CRIME

by EDWARD WELLEN

NATURALIST: *From an Admirer*, in a neat feminine hand. How nice. It has been a long while since I've had a taste of red-clover honey. I'll uncap the jar straightway and—ah, not so quickly. Humblebees alone visit red clover, as other bees cannot reach the nectar. The number of humblebees in any district depends largely upon the number of field mice, which destroy their combs and nests. Now the number of mice is largely dependent on the number of cats. The number of cats depends in a great measure upon the number of old maids in the village near the clover fields. Losing their young men in the Crimean War is the reason why a number of these women have turned to the sort of religious fanaticism that hates and fears my theory. On the chance that my mysterious admirer may be one of these, poor dear, I'll test the honey for poison before tasting it.

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Norah Lofts was born in 1904 on a farm in Norfolk, England. When her father died in 1913 and her family moved to the "small though very old market town" of Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, Norah's life was "altered altogether." Today she lives again in Bury St. Edmunds, in an antique house whose architecture combines the Tudor, Queen Anne, and Georgian periods.

Mrs. Lofts's many novels include BLESS THIS HOUSE *(a Literary Guild selection),* THE HOUSE AT OLD VINE *(also a Literary Guild selection),* THE KING'S PLEASURE *(about Katherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII), and* THE CONCUBINE *(about Anne Boleyn, the second wife of Henry VIII).*

The author's specialty is the historical romance, in which "she is more concerned with the psychology of her characters than with their swashbuckling adventures." However, the short story we now present is entirely different. In contrast, it is a contemporary story of suspense and panic, about a young wife at the end of Nine Days' Terror—nine days and nights of anonymous obscene phone calls . . .

THE MAN ON THE TELEPHONE

by NORAH LOFTS

Outside the house she paused and stared at it a moment, trying to see it as though she were a potential buyer making a preliminary inspection. It was not a pretty house, she knew, but it was solid, spacious, and quite well maintained. Below this surface thought, however, panic stirred even as she fumbled for her key.

At that moment the street-lamp on the corner sprang into light and everything outside its radiance grew suddenly darker. She opened the front door and reached in to snap on the lights. Then she hesitated, looking and listening, before stepping in and

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closing the door behind her. She turned and fastened the safety chain.

The hall was just as she had left it. On one side an oak chest bore a blue-and-white jar full of pink dahlias—the last of the season. Opposite stood the grandfather clock, mute now. On the floor was a Persian rug, faded and mended, but still good. Moving quietly, alert as some jungle creature, she went to the far end of the hall and into the kitchen.

Darkness stared in at the window over the sink and, still clutching her parcels, she went hurriedly and tugged the curtains closed, careful not to look at the window. A few days ago her reflection there had given her an awful fright.

With the curtains drawn the kitchen seemed cozy. They had spent rather more than they could afford on it, but Hal had said, "You'll be using the kitchen a lot, and the best is cheapest in the long run."

Long run. All the gleaming surfaces seemed to echo the phrase mockingly. They had lived there only six months and a few days when a sudden promotion had taken Hal to Wisborough, well out of commuting distance.

She put down her purchases and thought about a cup of tea, but she knew she could not rest until she had made her compulsive search of the house; and before she could do that she had to deaden her fear. She got the Scotch out of the living-room cupboard; there was only an inch or so left in the bottle, although she never touched more than one drink a day. She must remember to get a new bottle.

She swallowed the whisky with a little shudder and a grimace; she was not used to alcohol—what the people who have never known fear laughingly call "Dutch courage." Waiting for it to take effect she arranged the things she had bought. She was a neat and tidy person, and nine days of terror had not entirely changed her.

Now for it! She went into the hall and unlocked the door of the dining room, looked, listened, and then went in. It was an awkward room, just slightly too high for its size, but a dark-painted ceiling, a sideboard with a high back, a mirror hung horizontally, a clever arrangement of pictures, and a tall house-plant concealed this fault.

A colorful arrangement of flowers in the center of the table gave the room a lived-in air, though in fact she and Hal had not had a chance to eat in here. Two could sit comfortably in the kitchen, and

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what with the move and the alterations they had not yet had a chance to make friends and entertain. One of her troubles at the moment, for that matter, was that she was not sufficiently acquainted with anyone to be able to confide her worries.

She went on, locking the door behind her. Living room next. She looked around, then drew the curtains closed. Here, too, she had done a good job making the room comfortable. When she and Hal had seen the house for the first time his reaction had been completely negative. "Honey, we can't live here. It's the dreariest place."

But she had seen its possibilities and had pointed out that it was the cheapest house they had seen. Hal replied that since they had to take a mortgage anyway it might as well be on some attractive place. Hal had a bit of a slaphappy attitude toward money. He would justify a minor extravagance—and some not so minor—with a grin, and the remark, "After all, it's only money!"

She sometimes thought that married to a woman less careful than herself, he would find himself in real financial trouble. In the case of the house he had given way to her insistence and, finally, after all the work she'd done on it, he'd said that he never would have believed it, it didn't look like the same place.

She did not lock the living room because the telephone was there. Hal called every evening.

She switched on the light which served the stairs and the upper landing. It was an awkward staircase: nine steps, then an abrupt turn, which had caused a great problem when they were moving beds in, and then eight steps more.

All was well in the master bedroom, in the adjoining bathroom, in the guest room, never used, in the little room that had served Hal partly as a dressing room and partly as a study; all was well even in the storage room that held their trunks and boxes, Hal's golf clubs, and a big old mirror which had been broken in the move. One night last week her own distorted reflection in that mirror had given her a scare similar to but worse than the one she had suffered by the kitchen window.

Now she could go down and make her tea. She was pouring the boiling water into the pot when there was a tap on the kitchen window. She had been, in a way, almost expecting this, but it made her jump so violently that she spilled the hot water on her hand. Every window is latched, she thought,

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the front door is chained, the kitchen door bolted. Nobody broke in while I was away; there is nobody in the house but me; before anybody could get in from outside I could be on the telephone to the police. So why am I so scared?

The tap was not repeated. Pulling herself together, she realized what it had been. When she and Hal first saw the kitchen, the window had been almost entirely darkened by an overgrown jasmine bush. Hal had cut it back and it had responded by throwing out long vigorous shoots, one of which had just reached the window.

She was ashamed of herself—for being so frightened of nothing.

She put some ointment—kept for just such an emergency—on the scalded hand, placed bread and cheese with the tea on a tray, and carried it into the living room.

She had always been a great reader, but books were no help now because she could not concentrate on them. The television, like the clock in the hall, was silent, because of her need to listen; but she could still knit, and the sweater she was making for Hal was progressing nicely.

Suddenly the phone rang and again she jumped, dropping several stitches.

It was Hal. "Hello, honey."

"Hello, darling."

"How are you?"

"Very well." That was true enough. She was fine, physically. And she must say so, because if Hal had the slightest feeling anything was wrong he'd jump straight into his car and come home. "And you?"

"Busy as I can be. I know everybody says poor old Stubbs died suddenly, but, honestly, by the look of things you'd think no one had been here for a year. There's something else every day. But I'm getting there." He spoke with relish: a born manager. The new job could have been made for him. And nothing must interfere.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Mr. Treadman sent four prospects today. No good. One couple wanted a bungalow. So why did they come? Two of the usual—'*What*, only a one-car garage!' And the other was one of those women who house-hunt as a hobby. I know the type now. But cheer up, darling. There are some people coming tomorrow. A couple with five children, looking for a large house. Unless the five are all of one sex—which would defy the law of averages—the four bedrooms should be attractive, don't you think?"

"Let's hope so. This is no way to live."

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The evening phone call was a delight to them both, but they set a time limit because of the cost. Hal's new job carried an increase in pay, but their expenses were much greater; they would have to pay for another move, and the hotel in which he was living, although it sounded bleak, was far from cheap.

Perhaps, she thought, replacing the receiver, the shortness of the call was a blessing; she could manage for a short time to pretend that all was well, to sound normal, even lighthearted.

Now that Hal had made his call she could go to bed. She was sleeping badly and took both her book and her knitting with her. She locked the door of the living room; and once inside her bedroom she locked that door too.

In the bathroom she opened a new box of perfumed soap, washed, and then swallowed an aspirin, and, after a moment's consideration, another. What she wanted at this point was a sound night's sleep, a blotting out of consciousness, a respite from fear.

She slept, then woke with a start. She listened, fear rushing back into her. She heard nothing out of the ordinary. Just the wind, blowing under the eaves and making a whining noise; and the old floorboards creaking. The explanations came glibly.

But then there was another sound. A stealthy, intermittent squeak. Somebody must be opening the bathroom window inch by inch.

For a moment she was paralyzed; then adrenaline pumped into her blood. Anyone who was at the bathroom window had either climbed up a pipe or brought a ladder from the shed, and until he was actually across the sill he would be precariously balanced. One strong push . . .

She had never knowingly hurt anything or anybody in her life, but now she rushed to the bathroom fully prepared to push the intruder to certain injury, possible death.

The curtains hung straight and still; behind them the window was securely latched and outside there was nothing but the night. Yet the stealthy noise went on. She whirled around and saw, in the wastepaper basket, the tinted cellophane wrapping from the soap box. She had crumpled it into a ball and now it was releasing itself, creaking with each expansion.

She laughed weakly at her foolishness, then suddenly she leaned on the bowl and was sick.

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Back in bed, horribly wakeful, she reviewed the events which had reduced her to this pitiful state.

Like many sinister things it had begun simply. The telephone rang and she answered it, expecting to hear Hal's voice. But it was another voice, male, which asked, "Can I speak to Mr. Baker?" She had replied in the most ordinary way, "No. I'm afraid he isn't here." "Can you tell me when he will be back in town?" "Not for three weeks. I can tell you where to contact him. Just a minute."

Hal had been gone only two days and she had not yet memorized the numbers of either the Wisborough office or his hotel. She consulted the pad on which they were scribbled, and relayed the information. The voice said, "Thank you." An ordinary, routine exchange, the sort of thing any wife did a dozen times in a year.

Then the voice said, in a different way, "I expect you miss him." Nothing peculiar about that, either, except that it hinted at a friendly familiarity from someone who had not given his name. So she said, "Who is it?" There was a little pause and then the voice began to say things so completely obscene that she was dumbstruck; she slammed the receiver down and sat trembling. Can this really have happened to me? Did I hear what I heard? What shall I do?

But she steadied herself. It was not unheard of, it was not even new. There were men, a bit demented, who got their kicks out of making such calls, usually to women listed in telephone directories under their first names. And though she believed and hoped that by slamming down the receiver she had put an end to the incident, a funny doubt remained. Somebody knew that though she was married, she was alone right now and vulnerable.

And who knew that she was alone? All the men at Frane and Company who knew that Hal had gone to Wisborough—about 400 of them; and the three or four who were in Mr. Treadman's real estate agency. Could one of them be so foul-mouthed and vile?

Disgust, not fright, had been her emotion then. She also felt some guilt. Such an incident should be reported to the police. But what could they do, except ask questions and make a fuss? And she was afraid that any fuss might, in some round-about way, reach Hal. Forget it, she told herself. It might never happen again.

Two nights later she had been wakened from sleep by

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the ringing of the telephone extension beside the bed. She switched on the light and reached out sleepily for the receiver.

"It's Western Union," a voice said. "I have a telegram for you."

Hal's firm had some overseas connections. She reached for a pad and pencil and said, "I'm ready, read it, please."

"I think I had better bring it around. It's not something to be read over the phone. I could bring it myself, immediately."

Suspicion began to prickle; the time was just after midnight.

"It can wait till morning," she said.

"As you like. But you're a redhead, aren't you?" Before she could drop the receiver her horrified ears heard something of what this crazy person thought red hair implied. It was all absolute filth.

Now she knew that she should report it; the number of suspects narrowed down: someone who knew that Hal was away, someone who knew her by sight. But again she hesitated for fear Hal should find out.

And so the time of terror began. She dared not ignore the telephone at ordinary times. Hal called whenever he could, and he was working odd hours. Mr. Treadman called to make appointments for his clients and to report their decisions, all unfavorable so far. There was one more call in the middle of the night and that she did ignore. The telephone rang and rang; stopped and began again; and although on this occasion she heard nothing, it made her shudder to think that somewhere, probably quite close by, a man waited, ready to pour out terrible filth.

The persecution went on.

The telephone rang at ten in the morning.

"Mrs. Baker? I understand that you have a house for sale."

"That is so."

"Is it convenient for me to come and see it?" She'd never considered this situation. It was impossible to judge anything by the voice; the accent was a local one. But she was cautious, and thank goodness she was, for when she said that the house was in the agent's hands and she could only show it to those with appointments, the man said, "Very wise." And then, "But I'll get you yet! And when I do . . ." She heard just enough to make her feel sick.

And after all, anyone could get an appointment.

She took to peeping through the living-room window, to opening the door only when the chain was on; she lived in a state of perpetual terror.

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The day after she had been thrown into panic by a piece of cellophane was Friday. The family man and his wife came and went; at twelve o'clock the phone rang. Was it Mr. Treadman with the report on the large family?

The voice said, "I'm watching you. I always win. The longer the wait the longer the . . ."

She slammed it down, and when at about five o'clock the telephone rang again she was of two minds about answering it. It was early—on Friday—for Hal. But it could be Mr. Treadman.

It was Hal.

"Honey, listen, I'll be home this evening. I had to look into something at Wolverton and I thought to myself—hey, that's almost halfway home. And what's the point in being a big man if you can't take a weekend off? I don't know exactly when I'll be there; with any luck it will be between six and seven."

She said, "Darling, how marvelous!" Relief and joy flooded her and then a sternly practical thought popped into her head. There was nothing to eat—at least nothing from a masculine point of view—in the house.

"Hal, could you—I'm sorry to be a nuisance—but is there a store close to where you are? Anywhere you could pick up a steak for supper?"

"Almost next door. Don't worry. This prodigal son will bring his own fatted calf. I must go. Be seeing you."

Happy, restored, and confident, she sped about preparing vegetables, making his favorite dessert. Then she went around the house removing any sign of terror; she was about to replace the weights in the grandfather clock when she heard his key in the front door, and the check of the chain.

She ran to let him in and greeted him with an exuberance that reminded him of a puppy he had once owned. He hugged her hard and then said, "Honey, you've gotten thin. You haven't been eating properly."

"Oh, yes, I have. Huge meals every day. It must be the exercise. Upstairs, downstairs, all around the house. This way to the garage, ladies and gentlemen. Any more for the garden? Three or four times a day. It's guaranteed to work off the fat." She sounded gay, but she looked haggard.

"Any luck with the fellow with all the children?"

"I'm afraid not. All seven of them couldn't eat in the kitchen, and with the dining room in constant use the wife wanted someplace where she

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could run a serving cart between the stove and the table. I saw her point."

Hal saw it too, though he didn't say anything. It was an awkward, inconvenient house and no amount of prettifying could hide its basic faults. If it hadn't been for all her enthusiasm he would never have given it a second thought.

"Do we have time for a homecoming drink?" he asked.

"Yes. I'll just put this food away. Be right with you."

He dropped his bag near the foot of the stairs, looked at the clock and said, "Hey, what's this? Grandfather stopped?"

"Yes. Or gone mad. It struck about fifty times. But don't worry about that now." She almost dragged him into the living room. There he went to the corner cupboard which held their small supply of liquor.

No Scotch.

"I'm t—terribly sorry d—darling. I had an accident."

And that accounted for the bandage on her hand which he had noted—his eyes missed little—but had not yet had time to mention. He noted also the stammer; she had told him that as a child she had stammered but had outgrown it when she left school.

"We can make do with sherry tonight." He poured two drinks, sat down, and looked about with satisfaction. "It's lovely to be home. Happy weekend, darling."

Her book was lying on the sofa. He never read anything but technical books himself but he liked to show interest.

"Still reading about Marie Antoinette?"

"It's not a b—book to read quickly."

His eyes moved to the TV set. They had been avidly following a serial. He had now missed two installments.

"Have they found that sunken treasure yet?"

"I d—d—don't know. It all became such a m—mess. I couldn't be b—bothered."

She then said, not stammering at all, that he must be famished, so she'd better start preparing the beautiful steak he had brought. And after that they had one of their normal happy evenings until, not wishing to clutter up the master bedroom, he went to put his bag into his own dressing room, and found the door locked.

"M—Monday n—night," she said. "It was windy. That door r—r—rattled. So I locked it."

That night she slept well. And she was lucky about the clock. On her way to make the morning tea she put the weights back; she'd stopped it at a few minutes before seven, so now it went faithfully on.

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And all Saturday was blissful. Hal cut the lawn and at her request repruned the jasmine bush. Sunday began well too, but as the day advanced the imminent parting cast its shadow. And Hal was the first to acknowledge it.

"Look here, honey. You have tried. Give it up. Put a few things together and come back with me. We could leave a note and the keys with Mr. Treadman. After all, he sold the house to us and if we give him enough time he'll find somebody else to buy it."

The temptation was almost irresistible, but she had to be sensible.

"Oh, Hal, you know what it looked like when we first saw it. Our only hope of getting back what we paid, regardless of what we spent on it, is to have it looking nice and inhabited and for me to *be* here, pointing out its best features. It has only been two weeks . . . you must give me time. Say a month." Two more weeks of living under constant threat.

"But by that time the house I have my eye on in Wisborough will be sold, honey. I can't buy it until you've seen it, can I? And it'll sell in no time."

She felt an unreasonable envy of people who owned so salable a property, and the envy burst out in sharpness. Stammering badly, she demanded to know how he could even *consider* buying another house, with this one still unsold? Did he want *two* mortgages to worry about? She repeated, defiantly, her intention of remaining in the house, keeping it looking like a home, until it was sold.

Her tone astonished him: they had had differences of opinion often enough but she had never sounded so much like a nag. He answered her soothingly, and promised not to mention it again, and then made her promise to eat properly.

Now he stood in the hall, ready to go. He was taking back his overcoat and it hung on his arm; his right hand grasped his suitcase; his left clutched two of his books. Any normal wife would offer to carry something, go with him to the garage, and close the doors after him. But she dared not leave the door unlocked, even for a minute, and if she locked it Hal would guess. She eyed the shrubbery of lilac and laurel and thought—perhaps even now . . .

There was no need to simulate a shiver. "I think I won't c—come out. It's t—turned a bit ch—chilly."

He had not taken more than three steps before he heard her

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lock and chain the door.

On Monday Mr. Treadman rang early. He sounded hopeful. The couple for whom he was making an appointment at eleven o'clock were elderly and not looking for a modern house.

She rushed about. There were no more flowers in the garden, but her dried hydrangea heads and red berries looked well in the hall, and on the dining-room table she put a bowl of wax fruit under a glass dome, a real antique which she found at the back of a junk shop and bought for almost nothing.

It all looks so nice, she said to herself. Let them like it. Let them buy it.

Just before eleven the telephone rang again. Mr. Treadman, she thought, canceling the appointment.

"Nice weekend?" the sadistic voice asked. "I saw you shopping with hubby! What else did you . . ." She cut off the rest of it and stood trembling.

Before she could recover, the couple arrived, but she was so upset and stammering so wildly that she had difficulty in pointing out the good features of the house.

(Back in their car the wife said, "Oh, dear! It looked so suitable. But I do believe that people leave their mark on houses and I don't want to take over from somebody so obviously neurotic."

"I think," the husband said, "that she was hiding something and was afraid we'd spot it. Bad drains, most likely." They agreed that it was a pity.)

The telephone rang at three o'clock; she forced herself to answer it. It was Mr. Treadman, sounding jubilant. He had sold the house; he hoped she was pleased.

She had now had time to recall an old trick, learned in a stammering childhood: when a word gave difficulty you abandoned it and tried another, an easier one.

"I am very p—delighted. Who b—is it?"

"A client from another city. We circulate descriptions of our properties widely, you know. It exactly fits his requirements and he is willing to pay the full price."

"But without s—s—looking at it?"

She could hardly believe their luck; it was incredible that anyone would buy a house in such a casual way.

"I gather that my client was familiar with the house in the past. And he is slightly known to me. You don't have to worry. It is a firm offer."

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"Oh, th—the—I'm very grateful," she said.

She broke her own strict rule about not telephoning Hal during office hours. She sensed that she had disturbed him and that his full attention was elsewhere. When she stammered out the wonderful news he said, "Oh, good. Now listen, there's a train at four thirty; it gets in at seven. I'll meet you." She could not refrain from sharing the joke with him—a joke against herself.

"The f—f—comic thing is, here I was, trying so hard to keep it looking n—livable, and now it's s—bought by somebody who didn't even inspect it."

She began to laugh and there was a quality in her laughter that was disturbing. Hal visualized her falling down the awkward stairs with a heavy suitcase, or rushing for the bus and being knocked down.

"Listen," he said, "bring a small bag, just what you need for a few days. And get a taxi to take you to the station. I'll see you soon."

In the living room she stood still for a moment, indecisive. She was safe; tonight she would sleep soundly in Wisborough, beside Hal. But there were other women, as alone and vulnerable as she had been. The caller would find himself another victim.

She dialed the police, gave her name and address, and said that she wished to report some persistent and very unpleasant telephone calls. She was asked to hold on, and she assembled any scraps of information likely to be helpful—the voice young, the accent local; somebody who knew of Hal's movements; somebody who knew her by sight and had, possibly, an obsession with red hair. Not much to go on.

Wait! Judging from the close watch kept on her, somebody living in this neighborhood, and somebody who knew that telegrams from Western Union could arrive here in the middle of the night.

Her help was not needed. A slightly reproving voice informed her that there had been other complaints; some ladies had reported and collaborated fully, action had been taken, and a youth had been caught in the act during the lunch hour.

"It is unlikely that you will be troubled again, madam. If you should be, please contact us *immediately*."

The rebuke was well deserved and she accepted it meekly. When she thought of the irony of it all—so much endured for no purpose—she felt inclined to laugh again; but

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she had heard the note of impending hysteria in her voice as she talked to Hal. She could not allow herself to give way now.

In Wisborough, Hal worked on steadily until it was time to meet the train. She had once said, not insultingly—indeed, quite fondly—that he had a mind like the computer with which he dealt.

It was true. Feed in the evidence, facts, not fancies, ask the question, and out came an answer as nearly accurate as was possible in a world now known to be a bit lopsided, moving in an orbit which made leap years necessary. His mind had taken in the irrefutable evidence and it had produced a feasible solution.

Ahead of him, he knew, lay subterfuges, maybe downright lies, and certainly the financial juggling required of a man who had just "bought" his own house in Ashforth and intended tomorrow to buy one in Wisborough. The computer was willing to oblige with a set of dismal figures. But he had a cheerful and steady nature and the prospect did not dismay him. After all, as he had often said, it was only money.

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a *NEW* detective story by

GARY BRANDNER

Introducing a new detective—D. Stonebreaker, Private Investigator (and Eye) . . . a big guy with a face that looks as if "a sculptor had quit" on it. He's a real tough cookie, Stonebreaker, in body and mind, and he works among the chicanos in Los Angeles . . . "Black Mask" (or a reasonable facsimile) still lives . . .

COYOTE STREET

by GARY BRANDNER

SHE was a little bit of a thing. I could see her in silhouette reading *D. Stonebreaker—Private Investigator* on the frosted glass of my office door. She made a couple of half-hearted moves toward the doorknob, then drew a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and marched in.

She didn't say anything right away, just stood inside the door looking at me. I have an unnerving effect on people sometimes. Partly because of my size. Even sitting down behind a desk I look big. Then there's my face. It's been compared to a granite head that a sculptor had quit on. To help the girl relax I tried a smile. Sometimes that scares people, too.

It worked this time, though. The girl unfroze and walked closer to my desk. She was tiny, all right, but the soft sweater and tight pants left no doubt that she was a full-grown woman.

"You are Stonebreaker?" Her English had the musical accents of Mexico.

"That's me."

She studied me with black-coffee eyes. "My name is Elena Valdez. My husband Ramon works here in your building with the sweepers."

That would be the once-a-week cleaning crew the owner brought in to keep the L.A.

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Sanitation Department off his back.

I said, "Sit down, Mrs. Valdez, and tell me what I can do for you."

She perched on the edge of a wooden chair. "Will my husband have to know about this?"

"Not if you don't want him to."

"I can't pay you very much."

"I don't charge very much. What's the problem?"

"It's my brother, Carlos. He is—" She chewed on her lip as if she were having second thoughts about trusting me. "He is in the country illegally," she finished with a rush.

I waited for her to go on. Illegal Mexican immigrants are not a real hot item in Los Angeles. You can hardly throw a rock down Whittier Boulevard without hitting one.

"My husband and I paid two hundred dollars to have him smuggled across the border at Tecate. Carlos will pay us back when he can. Already he has a job, and soon he hopes to become a citizen."

"Good for him. Why do you need a detective?"

"Because of the coyotes."

"Coyotes?" I repeated.

"The streets are full of people who prey on the Mexican aliens. People like my brother are confused and afraid. They do not want to break the law, but also they do not want to be taken back to Mexico. The coyotes pose as friends. 'I will help you,' they say. Then they take the little money such people earn and do nothing for them. If one complains he finds one day he has been reported to the *migras*, the immigration people."

"How do you know your brother's in trouble with these coyotes?"

Her eyes flashed with a hint of Latin temper. "*Ai*, that Carlos can be such a *burro!* I know someone is taking from him the money he makes at his job, but he will not talk to me about it. He says a man must learn to make his way without the help of a woman."

"He has a point there."

"But I know he must be in some kind of trouble. You could find out, couldn't you?"

"Maybe. Tell me, Mrs. Valdez, why don't you want your husband in on this?"

"Ramon has done enough for my brother. I cannot ask any more of him." Elena held up her fine little head and looked me in the eye. "I will pay you with my own money that I earn from housekeeping."

She dipped into a woven handbag and pulled out several bills. She laid them on my desk, smoothing out the wrinkles.

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"Is this enough?"

I pushed one of the bills back to her and pocketed the rest. "This is enough. I'll want to talk to Carlos first. How's his English?"

"He has a little. I will go with you and help. Will tomorrow morning be all right?"

"Yeah. I'll be here about ten."

"I will meet you then," she said.

I had a feeling she wasn't giving me the whole story, but I didn't get a chance to ask. The door opened behind her and a dark heavy-bodied man in coveralls came in.

"Elena," he said, "I thought I heard your voice."

"Ah, Ramon," she said quickly, "I was just asking this man if you had been on this floor yet. I thought we could go home together."

"Didn't I tell you I work till midnight tonight?"

"I must have forgotten," Elena said. "I could wait for you."

"No, that will be two more hours. You go home and I'll see you later."

"Yes, Ramon," she said, lowering her eyes, and the two of them walked out of my office together.

I spent another hour finishing the report I was working on, then left the building, tromping down four flights of stairs since the elevator is shut down when the cleanup crew leaves. I went home and fell asleep watching the late late movie.

When I showed up the next morning at a quarter after ten Elena Valdez was waiting for me. The boys who ran the tout service across the hall had their door open and were eyeballing the girl and making loud remarks. I gave them a scowl and they got busy with something else.

We went downstairs and got into my jalopy. Elena was bright and talkative as I tooled over to East Los Angeles. As we drove she told me how a year ago she herself had slipped illegally across the border. She married Ramon, a U.S. citizen, giving her legal status here. Now she hoped her brother could make it, too.

The street where Carlos lived could have used a good rain to wash it down. The people who moved along the gritty sidewalk made a point of not looking at Elena and me as we got out of the car.

We climbed a flight of stairs between a pawnshop and a four-stool café. Recorded mariachi music followed us up from the open door of a tavern across the street.

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Elena led me down a hallway on the second floor to a door with a white card thumbtacked to the panel. On the card in penciled letters was printed: *C. Guerra.*

She knocked lightly, waited, then knocked again.

"Carlos must be asleep," Elena said. "He works the night shift."

She called his name, but there was no response from inside. I didn't like it and neither did the girl. The little smile faded from her lips.

I tried the knob. The door swung open and we walked into the room.

It was a room to make you want to be out on the street. The wallpaper was blotched with squashed bugs, and there were old foul-looking stains on the rug. Not a piece of furniture in the place stood solidly on four legs.

On the other side of the unmade bed I found Carlos. He was a slim good-looking kid lying on his back with his eyes open and empty. The front of his blue work shirt was crusted with dried blood.

Elena gave a little cry and started for the body. I grabbed her and held her away."

"*Madre Dios,*" she said, "who could have done this?"

I put her in a chair and went over to take a look. The body was stiff and cold, so he'd been dead for some hours. I counted at least four wounds in the chest. Under the bureau was a black-handled knife with dark stains on the blade.

Leaving the knife and the body where they were, I took Elena back down the stairs. She didn't sob, but the tears ran out of her big dark eyes and made shiny tracks down her face. We went into the café next door and I called the police. Then I bought Elena a cup of coffee and asked for her home phone number.

I dropped a dime in the slot and dialed. The receiver buzzed six times in my ear before a sleepy voice came on the line.

"Ramon Valdez?" I asked.

"Yes. Who is this?"

"Stonebreaker. You were in my office yesterday. I've just come from your brother-in-law's place. Elena's with me and she needs somebody. You'd better get over here."

"What's the matter? What happened?"

"Carlos is dead."

Ramon caught his breath on the other end, then he said, "I'll be there as soon as I can."

As I hung up, the first police car pulled to the curb. A small crowd began to gather in the street. They stared silently at the officers with cold impersonal dislike.

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The patrolmen in the car were both youngsters, and I didn't recognize them, but the head of the homicide team was Dave Pike. We'd been partners once. I filled him in on what little I knew, then hung around while the police went over the room and questioned the neighbors. After a while Pike lit a cigarette and walked down to the street, motioning for me to join him.

"How you doing?" I asked.

Pike made a sour face. "Nobody heard anything, nobody saw anything, nobody knows the dead man. All I know for sure is that it wasn't robbery. He had eight dollars on him, and that's a good haul in this neighborhood. Are you going to keep on working for the girl?"

"Sure. I haven't earned my fee yet."

"If you run onto anything you'll pass it along? You can operate without all the rules that hold us back." Pike chuckled. "In fact, you operated that way when you were with the Department."

"Yeah, that's why I'm a civilian now," I reminded him. "Don't worry, I'll give you anything I get that you can use. What about the knife?"

"A three-dollar switchblade. Every other kid on the street carries one."

Elena Valdez came down the stairs leaning on the arm of her husband.

"How is she?" I asked Ramon.

"Not so good. This is a terrible shock. When last I heard from Carlos just a week ago he seemed so happy. He had a job and he said he would soon get his permanent resident card."

"Where did he work?" I asked.

"At the Eastside Furniture Company. It's just a few blocks from here."

"Take care of the lady," I said. "I'll be in touch."

Eastside Furniture had a showroom on Atlantic Boulevard next to an auto salvage yard. The windows were plastered with bright posters advertising the incredible bargains inside. I went in and picked my way through the bright cheap furniture to the manufacturing area in the rear of the building.

Some two dozen men and women, all apparently Latins, were busy there hammering, sewing, and glueing the stuff together. Watching them work was a tall balding man with a buzzard-beak nose. I walked over and introduced myself. He told me his name was Bert Kettleman, he owned Eastside

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Furniture, and he was too busy to talk to me.

"Let's go into your office," I said, pretending I didn't hear the last part.

He started to brush me off, then he took another look at my size and my face and decided he could spare a couple of minutes.

"Did you have a Carlos Guerra working here?" I asked.

"'Did have' is right," Kettleman said. "He didn't show up last night, and that's it as far as I'm concerned. I can't keep people on the payroll who don't show up every day."

"He didn't show up because he's dead."

"Oh. Well. Sorry to hear that." Kettleman made a try at looking sorry.

"How did he get along here?"

"Fine, as far as I know. Did his work, didn't say much, had no beefs with anybody."

"Did you know he was in the country illegally?"

"Sure I knew. Ninety percent of the people who work here are wetbacks. What of it? There's no law against hiring them."

"And they work cheap," I added.

"So what? It's still better than they could make in Mexico. If it wasn't for guys like me they'd all starve to death. Or be out holding up liquor stores."

"You're just an all-around good guy."

"Listen, I help these people when I can. Didn't I find your boy Guerra a room close to the factory just three days ago? Saved him a couple of bucks a week in bus fare."

"I don't suppose you got a kickback from the landlord."

"We do each other a favor when we can. What's your hustle, anyway, Stonebreaker?"

"I want to know where you get your workers."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean who steers them to you, Kettleman? These Mexicans don't just walk in off the street on the chance you might have a job for them."

I could see Kettleman was searching for a reason not to give me the information. I scowled at him and he shrugged as if it really didn't make any difference anyway.

"Joe Figueroa sends most of 'em over."

"Who's he?"

Kettleman dug through his wallet for a business card and handed it to me. It read: *J. L. "Joe" Figueroa, Immigration Services. Se habla espanol.* The address was not far away, on Brook Avenue.

I tucked the card into my pocket and walked out. Before

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I was out of the manufacturing area I heard Kettleman pick up the phone and start dialing.

On Brook Avenue I stopped at a *burrito* stand across from Figueroa's address and ordered a *chile relleno.* I took a seat at the end of the outdoor counter where I could keep my back to the wall.

They came sauntering across the street looking almost like twins—long black hair, fleshy mouths, tight low-riding pants. One of them had a scar that pulled down the corner of his right eye, and he was a couple of inches taller than his pal. They slouched up and stood in front of me with their hips canted to one side, old Marlon Brando style.

"You got a match, man?" the taller one asked me.

"No."

"Hey, what you mean 'no?' I see you smokin' a cigarette. You don't like chicanos or somethin'?"

"I don't like *you.* Get lost."

He turned to the other in mock astonishment. "Did you hear that, Chongo? Here's this Anglo comes into our neighborhood and tells us to get lost. I think we better give him something to take back to his own part of town to remember us by."

They were amateurs. Pros move in and do their job without wasting time talking about it. These two sounded like characters in an old Bowery Boys movie.

They were still doing their act when I hit the tall one on the side of the head with the sugar container. He hit the concrete face first in a shower of sugar and broken glass.

The one called Chongo dived a hand into his pocket and came up with a knife that was brother to the one that killed Carlos. He feinted twice, then lunged at me as I came off the stool.

Before I got completely out of the way the blade sliced through the sleeve of my jacket and up my forearm. While Chongo was off balance I drove my fist into his belly He sat down hard looked at me as if I'd cheated. To discourage him from getting back up I kicked him in the jaw.

I scooped up the fallen knife, dropped it into a pocket, and headed across the street to the office of Immigration Services. The cut on my arm was not deep, but it was bleeding on my clothes, and that made me mad.

The waiting room was full of Mexicans who looked ready to bolt out of the door at the sight of a badge. I ignored them and strode up to the lacquered

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blonde who sat at a desk at the far end.

"Where's Figueroa?" I said.

She glanced at my bloody hand, then at a closed door behind her. "I think he's busy with a client. Let me buzz him for you."

"Don't bother." I stumped past her and pushed in through the door. Behind the desk sat s soft-bodied man with thick black eyebrows and a matching mustache. He looked surprised to see me.

I put the knife on his desk blotter. "One of your boys dropped this."

His eyebrows formed into a V. "What happened?"

"They fell down and hurt themselves."

"That has nothing to do with me, mister. What do you want here, anyway? I'm not breaking any laws."

I said, "Maybe sending those punks to carve me up is not illegal, but I find it mighty irritating. Now I want some straight answers from you, Joe."

"I don't have to answer anything for you. This is my office and you have no right to come in here and threaten me."

As he talked, Figueroa's hand crept toward the top desk drawer on his right. I let him get four fingers inside, then I reached across and slammed the drawer. He sucked in a couple of quarts of air, but with a great effort he kept from screaming. I reached into the drawer and pulled out the pistol he was after.

"Tell me about Carlos Guerra, Joe," I said.

He looked at me through eyes that glittered with pain and hatred. "I don't know the name."

"Joe, you've got one good hand left. If you want to keep it, don't play games with me."

It took him two seconds to decide to cooperate. "What do you want to know about Guerra?"

"Who put the blade in him last night?"

Figueroa managed to look surprised through his pain. "I don't know anything about it. So help me. Is he dead?"

"He's dead."

"Hell, I liked the kid. I wouldn't have any reason to want him dead. I got him his job, did you know that? I was tryin' to get him a resident card."

"How much of his wages were you taking for that little service?"

"Look, I gotta live, too. Don't you think it costs anything to get these people straightened out? Guerra didn't have no papers at all, and when they got no relatives who are

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citizens that makes for a lot of trouble. You gotta get notarized statements from people who'll swear he is who he says he is. And believe me, these chicanos don't like to put their names on anything. Sure, Guerra paid me to get a card for him. I can't work on credit. These wetbacks can be picked up any time and packed into a bus back to Mexico next day."

So I'd found at least two of the coyotes who were feeding off Carlos Guerra, now that it was too late to do him any good. Also, I had a pretty good idea now who killed him. And why.

I left Joe Figueroa sucking on his injured fingers and drove out to see Ramon and Elena Valdez. They lived in the rear half of a stucco duplex. The neighborhood was old but clean, with tiny green lawns in front of every house.

Elena came to the door. Her eyes were red and her face puffy. "What is it?"

"Is Ramon here?"

"He is sleeping."

"Get him up."

She moved aside and let me come in, then walked through a door into the bedroom. In a couple of minutes she was back with Ramon. He was unshaved and wearing a bathrobe too big for him.

I said, "Ramon, did you tell me you hadn't heard from Carlos for a week?"

"That's right."

"Then how did you know where to find his place this morning? He only moved in there three days ago."

"You told me the address on the phone."

"No, I didn't. I just told you to come over to your brother-in-law's place."

"What are you saying?" Elena asked, moving a step closer to me.

I ignored her and went on. "And you didn't work until midnight last night either. The building was empty when I left at eleven o'clock. You killed Carlos, Ramon."

"You're crazy!" he snapped. "Why would I kill my wife's brother?"

Elena stared at her husband in growing horror. She said, "You *knew*, didn't you!"

"He knew," I said. "He probably found out from Joe Figueroa that Carlos had no relatives in the States. No mother, no father, no sister."

Ramon sagged into a chair. "Okay, Stonebreaker, you called it. I found out that Carlos was no brother to Elena when Figueroa wanted me to sign a paper for him. I guess they must have had a lot of laughs at me. Imagine a guy spending his

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own money to bring his wife's boy friend into the country. Real funny.

"I followed Elena when she left your building last night. I saw her go up the stairs at that crummy roominghouse and I saw what room she went into. Then I waited in the bar across the street and drank beer until she came out an hour later. I went up then and found Carlos getting ready to go to work. The smell of her was still in his bed."

Ramon looked to his wife as though for some sort of forgiveness. He found none and dropped his eyes to the floor. "Then I killed him."

In a little while the police came and took him away.

As I headed down the walk to my car Elena asked, "What am I going to do now?"

I looked back at the slim little body and the oval face with the huge dark eyes. I thought about what happened to two men because of her.

"You'll survive," I said, and left her standing there.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 389th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a quiet little gem—sweet as "the sweet strains of string music" . . .

The author, Ira Solet, was 54 when he wrote "Musical Chairs." For 30 years Mr. Solet has been a research chemist, metallurgist, and engineer. His hobbies include (you won't be surprised to learn) playing music—the violin and flute; fencing with foil and saber; climbing the White Mountains; and acting in the community theater—all of which, in some strange creative way, gives a lyrical quality to his prose . . .

MUSICAL CHAIRS

by IRA SOLET

I finished tuning my E string, adjusted my music stand, and nodded to Fred, our first violinist.

"It's about time," Fritz muttered good-naturedly. Fritz was our violist. Peggy, the cellist, got ready to play with no comment, the soul of patience as usual. Fred glanced at the three of us, his bow ready, then started the first notes of the theme of Mozart's *String Quartet in F Major.*

We had begun another of our Thursday-night musical sessions.

Intent on my second violin part, I thought, How many times have we played this quartet—fifteen, twenty? Yet it never failed to fill me with warm pleasure and a feeling of close affection for my friends. Peggy's cello played quarter and half notes, providing the stable rhythmic bones of the musical structure, while Fritz and I, viola and second violin, explored Mozart's musical thoughts in parallel lines. Fred, as befitted the first violin, was privileged to make the primary musical statement.

How well Fred is playing tonight, I thought. It's been months since his violin sang with so much spirit.

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Actually it was about a year ago that Fred's musical problems had begun—soon after he married Lola. We were afraid that Fred was looking for trouble marrying a girl half his age, but when a man is infatuated there is little his friends can do.

Naturally, we all attended the wedding, but we had little contact with Lola after that. A certain coldness, a faint air of disapproval of her husband's musical friends was enough to discourage any further social contact. But on the surface Fred looked happy.

It is difficult for one player of a quartet to hide anything from the other three. We had played together at my house, as devoted amateurs, every Thursday night for the past twelve years, and a rapport had developed not only musically but also personally—almost as if we four had fused into one complex whole. So we all knew with no words spoken that Fred was having trouble at home.

Then two weeks ago, while we were drinking coffee after the Brahms *A minor*, Fred told us the whole sorry story. I guess he felt he owed us an explanation. The Brahms had been a disaster—stiff and mechanical where it should have been graceful and searching. If there is something on a fiddle player's mind besides music, playing Brahms is a trap.

So here was Fred, unhappy and uncomfortable, telling us in detail what we already knew in general. Lola had been pleasant enough at the beginning, but soon she was dropping a hint here and there that she resented being left alone every Thursday night. She couldn't understand how a mature man could enjoy scraping horsehair across gut strings—especially when he had a loving little wife to keep him company.

At first Fred had tried very gently to explain what playing music meant to him. It was not just a pleasurable hobby—it was a way of life, a chance to converse with the great composers who had heroic and profound things to say.

Alas, it was no use. Lola saw the quartet as her competitor. Worse yet, she began to complain about the time Fred spent in daily practise. Eventually it was the actual sound of the violin that annoyed her. Tantrums became frequent.

"Why are you punishing me this way?" she would wail. Fred was bewildered but still patient.

Finally, inevitably, the unspeakable threat was made. I remember Fred's shocked face and the disbelief in his voice when he came to the end of his sad tale two weeks ago.

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"Lola told me she would smash my violin."

"No, no," we all murmured. Just a childish threat."

"She meant it all right," Fred said. "She was very quiet when she said it."

There were no words then, but it was not necessary to speak. It was not just Fred who was threatened, it was all of us. As we looked at each other we knew what had to be done.

I was not surprised, therefore, when the telephone rang at about midnight a week later—which was last Thursday. The music-making was over and everyone had gone home. I was in bed but not yet asleep.

"This is Homicide," the voice said. "I got a few questions for you." He told me that Lola had been murdered earlier that night, and he was checking out Fred's story.

"Yes," I said, "we played chamber music tonight just as we have every Thursday night for the past twelve years. We started at eight and broke up about eleven. Yes, we were together all the time." I allowed a small amused note to creep into my voice. "You realize that you need four players to play quartets?"

"That's what *he* said." The voice on the telephone sounded irritated. "He said he got home shortly after eleven and found his wife dead with a knife in her chest. The M.E. says she died instantly at about nine o'clock. The blood was just beginning to dry." The voice sounded a little disappointed that Fred had an alibi and was obviously in the clear.

The next day was bothersome. My neighbors were questioned and they dutifully reported that, as on every Thursday night, the sweet strains of string music had issued forth from my apartment. Fritz and Peggy added their voices to mine that the four of us had met and played as usual the night before. With no immediate suspect, the police started looking for a transient thief. We four were briefly together at Lola's funeral on Saturday, and here it was Thursday night again.

As I said, Fred was in fine form, relaxed and lyrical. It was good to play quartets again, after what happened last week—although I must admit I had been agreeably surprised to find I enjoyed playing string trios so much. It had been a little strange to be playing the only violin part with the viola and cello, but enjoyable.

There was no point in telling this to the police, though. First, they are not music lovers; and second, it is very hard to find a good first violinist.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 390th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . revealing one angle of the eternal triangle as probed in the ghostly lighted stillness of the night . . .

The author, Vincent James (a pseudonym), has had the patchwork of experiences usually associated with "a writer's background": copy boy and sports writer for two newspapers; pipe-fitter and tinsmith's helper; information clerk for the Penn R.R.; wheat harvesting in Montana and apple picking in Wenatchee Valley, Washington; art student and freelance artist. Mr. James's interests and hobbies include literature, particularly Nineteenth Century Russian writers (Gogol, Andreyev, Chekhov, etc.), American and Canadian true crime (especially trials ranging from 1600 to early Twentieth Century)—and getting into the car with his wife and going wherever the fancy takes them . . .

WHEN TOMORROW COMES

by VINCENT JAMES

When tomorrow comes, she thought, watching the thin shadows that the breeze-puffed curtains made in the silvery patch of moonlight overhead, I will do it and then it will be all over. Lying in her bed in the darkness, with the warm soft scents of the dying summer stealing through the open windows, her lips silently framed the words "all over" several times. She reached her hand up under the pillow and felt the cool hard shape of the plastic bottle that held the pills she had so carefully hoarded ever since she had sensed what was happening, and she said aloud, but very quietly, "Finished."

It seemed unreal, a nightmarish dream that she meant to kill her own husband; but she

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could never, never let him go, and the unyielding feel of the bottle in her clenched fist was not the substance of a dream. By turning her head slightly she could see, past the sharp silhouette of the night table, Ted's bulky figure lying on his side and facing away from her. His breathing was calm and regular in sleep.

A small stab of annoyance pricked her at his inert, unconscious ignorance of the tragedy that had stalked into their lives. Everything that seemed the same had somehow become so different now. The whirring of a passing automobile on the other side of the park that reached its crescendo and faded away in the direction of Hillsville struck her nerves like a saw blade on a nail.

How had it all began, she wondered for the thousandth time, staring up at the dim ceiling, her fingers ceaselessly shaping folds in the light summer coverlet. Did this happen inevitably when a woman grew older? But certainly Helen Vance was the same age—older perhaps, she thought with sudden malicious and hopeless pleasure.

Was it because there had been no children? Of course they had both wanted them; it seemed so long ago now, but it was just one of those things and neither she nor Ted could really be blamed. The doctors themselves had never seemed quite sure as to the why of it but it just never had happened. Would it really have made any difference?

Perhaps her taking the job in the Carruthers Real Estate office had been the catalyst. They hadn't needed the extra money —Ted made enough to keep both of them in comfort; it was just that she had needed something to do, something that would get her out of the rut she felt she had fallen into.

There was no denying that Ralph Carruthers was a good-looking man, but he too was married and, besides, he had three children. Ted couldn't possibly have been jealous; it was too ridiculous, but at the same time she was annoyed at the little wavy tingle that the idea of Ted's being jealous sent through her, even now.

It was true Ted was still outwardly attentive and affectionate, but with all her instincts she knew the truth. It was too late now. It would never be the same. Like a bright summer flower their love had bloomed sweetly, brilliantly, and then shedding its petals one by one had quietly and sadly died. She felt a tear trace its small cool trail down the side of her face.

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It seemed ages ago now, although it had been only last summer that Helen Vance moved into the house next door. The woman appeared in the eye of her mind with the clarity of an image on TV, poised, fresh in the summer heat, slim and attractive and looking years younger than she should have.

It wasn't anything she could put her finger on. Helen was friendly and pleasant to both of them and Ted openly enjoyed her company. It was the way their eyes met, the shy knowing smiles.

Helen's husband had been an army officer who had been killed in Vietnam. Oddly enough, and her lips twisted into a mirthless grin in the dark, she had to admit that under different circumstances she could have liked and admired Helen.

How was it that she knew so clearly, so unmistakably, that Ted was gone from her? Couldn't he see the tiny lines around Helen Vance's eyes and the little telltale pouches on her delicate jaw line, or did he just see the vestiges of beauty and the graceful way she moved and sat and smoked a cigarette?

Her fingers again sought and gripped the bottle of pills under her pillow. She couldn't let Ted go like that. She squeezed her eyes shut as though to blot out the pictures of Ted and Helen that her tortured mind was conjuring up—she couldn't, she wouldn't, she thought fiercely—and she brought the bottle out and pressed it against her aching forehead.

Better that he was dead.

The distant clacking of the 1:35 slowing into Hillsville worked its way into her racked consciousness. There would be people on that train coming back from the city—happy, tired couples who had been to the theater or perhaps had been dancing at a hotel restaurant or night club. Herb Williams and his wife Alice (certainly she was no beauty—a small, round, graying woman always laughing at nothing in particular) were forever rushing off to the city to see a show. They were probably on that train sleepily discussing the actors or the play they had just seen and then getting into their car in the parking lot back of the station and driving home along the deserted roads, Alice laughing and looking nearsightedly into Herb's face in the dim light of the car as they rolled through the perfumed summer night.

She felt so alone lying there in the still, ghostly lighted room, thinking of the happiness in other people's lives while her own had come to an end. She

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thrust the bottle of pills back beneath the pillow and felt suddenly that she had to move, to do something rather than lie in sleepless agony through the rest of the night. She lurched up on one elbow and tautening her legs prayed, "Oh, God, if only I could get to sleep."

Then suddenly in the midst of her misery she became aware of something else, some disquieting thing sensed rather than heard. What was it? Some stupid household annoyance like the refrigerator acting up again? She strained to hear and then all at once the answer dawned on her.

The complete absence of sound had penetrated her awareness. All was still, completely and absolutely still. Even the slight summer-night breeze seemed to have died away and the sheer curtains no longer swirled gently full to be drawn back with a soft puffing into the open windows. Outside were only silence and darkness.

She put her face close to the illuminated numerals of the clock dial and read 1:55. The very ticking of the clock seemed somehow subdued. She tried to identify the phenomenon of the absence of sound, checking off the familiar things that might be responsible for the eerie hush; then like a sickening icy wave rushing up from the pit of her stomach she knew.

Her eyes wide with horror, she stared at the dimly seen bulk of Ted's back. There was no sound; the full regular breathing had stopped. She strained to see the rise and fall of his wide rib cage; was the breathing there or was its absence a trick of the moonlight?

Perspiration that had nothing to do with the warmth of the night started out in tingling beads at her hairline. She found difficulty in breathing. "Please," she begged, "make him move, cough, anything—" But the grim quiet of the silver-lit room with its inky pools of familiar but suddenly menacing shapes was still there.

She felt as she had once felt when as a very young girl (how young—thirteen, fourteen?) she had gone on a swimming date at Cobb's Bay and one of the spindly gangly boys, as a stupid joke, had pushed her off the dock into the water. Down, down she went into the cold green water, with patches of light and patches of darkness swirling around her—the same feeling of helplessness—until she had recovered her wits enough to put her small skills into action and reached the surface coughing and spluttering.

What could she do now? What skills or knowledge could

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she use to bring that strong fine man back from pale moonlit immobility? She flung off the coverlet and sat on the edge of the bed. All the dismal anecdotes she had ever heard came flooding into her mind: "Hartley was running to make the 7:30 and then he just seemed to fall forward—" and "Mr. Bennett was always an odd old fellow; passed out sitting in his easy chair—" and "Boyd was only thirty-six when—"

An irresistible magnetism was pulling her over to his bed. She had to know. As she crossed the half-blinded, lighted rectangle of the window, her still youthful figure was silhouetted for a moment through the loose folds of her summer nightgown.

Timidly, full of dread, she approached the quiet figure. The thinning strands of hair across the top of his head were not enough to shadow the whiteness of his skin. She felt choked, afraid to do what she was being driven to do, and she stood there, one hand stretched out toward him. Her small hand, half flexed, paused over the wide back. "God, God, please, God," she sobbed and dropped her hand lightly on his side.

Cold panic swept her. She could feel no movement with the tips of her fingers. In a frenzy she placed her palm flat on his ribs.

Ted flung one arm sleepily up over his head and she almost collapsed. Gently she withdrew her shaking hand. He mumbled something and straightened his legs. She retreated quickly to her own bed.

She felt like falling on her knees and praying but instead she crawled exhausted under the coverlet and murmured like a child, "Thank you, God, thank you." The tears were streaming from her eyes. In ten minutes she was fast asleep . . .

The early summer sunlight was flooding the half-shaded windows when she awoke. She was startled to find it was past 7:30, and looking over she saw that the other bed, rumpled, the pillow still bearing the impress of his head, was empty. She had a sudden impulse, remembering, to rush over and kiss the shadowy indentation, but instead she lay back feeling wonderful, at peace with the world. She almost laughed at her morbid thoughts and panic fears with the brightness of the sunny day bathing the room, and she felt ashamed at what had been in her mind.

Ted, clean-shaven and combed, smelling of lotion and looking immense in his thin bathrobe, came whistling in from the bathroom.

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"Hello, honey," he said smiling down at her and sitting on the edge of the bed. "How are we feeling today?"

"Fine, wonderful," she said, stretching her arms. She would have liked to have said, "I love you, I love you so terribly much!"

But she knew he wouldn't understand, so she smiled up at him instead.

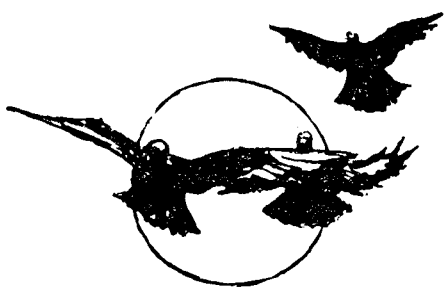
His slightly heavy face became thoughtful, and looking at her closely he said, "Honey, you look a little peaked. I think it would do us both good if we could get away for a while—we need a change of scenery. How about going up to the lake this weekend—the sun and the water would be good for us. I have a day coming and Carruthers Real Estate should be able to spare you Monday. It'll make a nice three days."

"Ted, Ted," she said, locking her fingers at the back of his neck, "I'd love it." Her heart was warm and overflowing. "Just the two of us. Yes, we both could use it."

He stood up and moved away from her a little embarrassedly. "Well," he said sheepishly, "I was thinking perhaps we could ask Helen if she would like to tag along—she's all alone, you know."

She turned on her side away from him and her hand slid under the pillow and touched the plastic bottle.

Tomorrow had come.



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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

In which you will meet, in order of appearance and among others, Boston Blondie, Nora Woof, Simone Tempter, Hillary Quinn, Goldilock Homes, Samantha Shovel, Micheline Hammerlock, Charlotte Chin, Hercula Parrot, May Gray, and Violet Pantz (surely you have met them all before!) in the first SECs meeting (Society for the Elimination of Criminals) held secretly in McNertny's Wonderful Boozeria . . . a funny story and a delightful change of pace . . .

GIVE ME LIB, OR GIVE ME DEATH

by ROD REED

A furtive figure moved through the dark night toward the back door of McNertny's Wonderful Boozeria, Men Only, Closed Mondays. It was Monday. A ring of skeleton keys was produced, and the third one opened the door.

Using a pen flashlight, the intruder went through the kitchen into the main salon of the saloon. Dusty blackout blinds, left over from the war before last, were swiftly drawn. Not until then was the light switch clicked.

Even so, the illumination in McNertny's was not very bright, but it did reveal the trespasser as a striking, tow-headed woman, under 30 in years but over 30 in chest. She glided to the front door and unlocked it. Three more furtive figures entered.

They were followed at intervals by what might be described as a small parade of furtive figures. When a dozen or so were inside, the tow-head said, "I believe we're all here except the guest of honor, who isn't due for half an hour. We can do a little organizing in that time. By default, I'm chairperson pro tem. After we deal with the preliminaries we can elect a permanent leader. Most of you know me, but for the rest I'll introduce myself. I'm called Boston Blondie."

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A fat lady muttered, "Yes, dearie, and I can remember when you were Boston Brunettie." She thought she had muttered it under her breath. However, Boston Blondie had exceptionally keen ears. She turned a wide lip smile and glacier eyes toward the chubby one and said, "You're right as usual, madame. And, of course, we all recognize you. You are Nora Woof, the stout detective. Everyone here feels privileged that you could tear yourself away from your penthouse where you potter about potting prize petunias."

"Pfui!" retorted Nora. "Can you never get anything right? I raise rhododendrons."

"If you say so. Of course, I defer to the dean of distaff dickettes. One would not argue with the oldest living sleuth."

Some of those present were tickled with the exchange and waited eagerly for Nora's riposte. Others thought, if somebody doesn't *do* something, this will disintegrate into a meeting of a ladies' bowling league.

One who felt that way stood up. Above her head was a glowing halo. "The horticulture discussion between our eminent colleagues is of absorbing interest. Yet I think it should be postponed until we have disposed of the question of why this session was called in the first place. By the way, I'm known as Simone Tempter."

Nora, annoyed at the interruption of her no doubt devastating riposte, grumbled, but inaudibly this time, "I know you, Simone Tempter. You are called The Scent because of your exotic perfume."

"The chair recognizes Ms. Tempter," said Boston Blondie. "You have a good question and I'll answer it. Our meeting was called because we female detectives are sick and tired of being relegated to second-class detectiveship. We want recognition. We feel we are better snoopers than any men!"

Cries of "Right on!" and "You seddit!" and "How true!" and "Up the girls!" greeted these remarks.

Blondie continued, "So a few of us have decided to try to work up an organization. The Women's Lib movement hasn't given any consideration to *our* problem. We must fight our own battle."

"I quite agree," agreed Hillary Quinn.

"You may count on my support. It's elementary," declared Goldilock Homes.

"I back you one thousand per cent," asserted Samantha Shovel.

But the meeting did not go

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smoothly. It is an unfortunate truth that, although ladies may be superior to gentlemen, their meetings never go any more smoothly—and sometimes less.

There was bickering about the proposed name of the organization. It was suggested that they call themselves the Society for the Elimination of Criminals, or SEC.

"I don't like that," somebody objected. "Punsters will call us the Opposite SECs."

"Or the Fair SECs."

"Or the Unfair SECs."

Calm Hillary Quinn stood up and said, "Ladies, the matter of a name for our organization is too important to be settled hastily. Let's hold that in abeyance. Perhaps our chairperson can appoint a committee to study the matter and report at our next meeting, if any."

"I second the motion," said Micheline Hammerlock.

Charlotte Chin and Ms. Motto nodded, both inscrutably.

The chairperson appointed a committee of three, then continued, "Whatever our organization may be called eventually, there are matters that demand our attention right now. In the first place, we need money—"

Chairs scraped back and a number of the furtive figures headed for the door.

"Wait!" cried the temporary chairperson. "We're not going to take up a collection. We have a mystery, and if we can solve it, we'll clear a cool million dollars for our organization without any of us having to donate a thin dime. And I'm confident that even if we can't solve that mystery, our guest of honor can."

But the guest of honor was about to have a problem of her own.

Hercula Parrot, the famous Belgian detective, came out of Le Chat et le Violin, New York's finest French restaurant. She peered impatiently left and right.

"Cordon bleu!" she exclaimed. "It is an irony. I, the greatest sleuth in all the world who can easily find the missing crown jewels or the stolen eye of the idol, I, Hercula Parrot, cannot find a taxicab!"

A young man approached her and tipped his hat. "Perhaps I can help you, Miss," said he.

Hercula looked at him shrewdly and observed, "You have on the uniform. I deduce that you are a gendarme, no?"

"No, ma'am. I'm only a humble Boy Scout. It's my duty to do a good deed every day. Please let me help you. You're my last chance before bedtime."

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"A Scout Boy, eh? I have heard of you. You know how to find the north side of a tree. Can it be that you are also able to locate the north side, or any side, of a taxicab?"

"Sure. Come along."

Had Hercula but known, this fellow was not a Boy Scout at all. He was a sinister character known to the underworld as M.T.M., or Moe the Mimic. He had disguised himself just to fool her. Perhaps the eminent sleuth should have noticed he was much older than a Boy Scout. But the night was dark and besides, out of vanity, Hercula refused to wear the glasses prescribed for all people who have little gray hairs as well as little gray cells.

The "Boy Scout" put two fingers in his mouth and let out a piercing whistle. As if by magic a cab appeared. Moe opened the rear door and Hercula started climbing in, turning her head to the "Scout" to say, "Merci, mon petit." Once inside she was surprised to note that the back seat was already occupied by a disfranchised middle linebacker. It was but the work of a moment for him to gag Hercula and bind her leg and foot.

The cab sped to a handy abandoned warehouse. Inside, Moe the Mimic traded garb with Hercula as his henchmen kept the famous lady detective covered with a gun, out of a sense of decency, no doubt. Leaving her, they then sped to McNertny's Wonderful Boozeria.

Meanwhile, back at the SECs meeting, the sexy sleuths were overcome with curiosity and greed about that million-dollar mystery. Their chairperson had explained to them, "We can collect a million-dollar reward if we solve the robbery at the United Notions.

"As you must be aware, the United Notions, manufacturer of toys, games, and novelties, was the victim of a gigantic robbery last week. The story was in all the papers. Still, it won't hurt any of us to be refreshed on the details, so let me sum up briefly."

Consulting notes she had made in a genuine detective notebook that had come with her genuine private-eye kit, Boston Blondie outlined the crime:

Two officials of the company were in the counting room counting up the money from the sale of a new doll that had replaced Barbie in the affections of little girls. The doll didn't say, "Mama." It said, "Oh, mother, don't be gross! Why are you and daddy so square?" And when the doll

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was wound up it went off and joined a commune.

Naturally the doll was a runaway best-seller and close to a billion dollars was in the counting room, most of it in million-dollar bills. A masked gunman entered, ordered the treasurer and his assistant to lie face down on the floor, scooped up the money, and departed. The treasurer had cleverly fallen so that his head was just above a secret alarm button which he pressed with his nose.

Immediately all exits from the building were sealed off. There was no possible way for the robber to escape. Security guards kept everybody inside until the police arrived. A search found the thief's mask in the Stuffed People Department on a life-sized figure of the Lone Ranger. The gun was located behind a water cooler. It turned out not to be a real gun but only a "Little Kid's Napalm Pistol," one of the hottest items in the United Notions line.

Everybody was searched to the skin before being allowed to leave the premises. Not a single million-dollar bill was found. One detective thought he had earned promotion when he discovered several packets of bills hidden under crumpled Kleenex in a wastebasket. But they turned out to be only play money, regularly used in the company's famous game, Monotony.

An employee, identified as Philip D. Box, explained that the play money had been discarded because it was defective. It was his job to see that only first-class phony bucks were included in the game sets.

"Police claim to be following up hot leads," concluded Boston Blondie, "but the truth is, they don't have a single clue to the identity of the robber or what he did with the loot."

"Hoo, boy! If we can solve this one we'll put that male chauvinist Commissioner of Police in his male chauvinist place!"

"Female detectives will get rightful recognition at last!"

"And don't forget the reward."

Charlotte Chin raised her voice above the general babble. "Sisters in sleuthery, please to remember ancient saying of Confucius: 'Never count your Egg Foo Yung until it is in the platter.' I humbly suggest we not spend reward until we have solved case."

This speech had a sobering effect. A number of those present admitted to themselves that they were just as baffled as the male chauvinist Commissioner. Several, however,

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looked wise. And Nora Woof, who appeared to be asleep, was in fact only concentrating.

Hillary Quinn arose, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. She was, in fact, an amateur detective, her profession being that of novelist and short-story writer. But the pros knew there was nothing amateurish about her crime-fighting, so they listened with respectful attention as she spoke.

"Our honorable Oriental colleague has made a good point. We must get cracking. Now I have a suggestion. Let me put details of the caper into a story. Then I'll stop the action with an italicized paragraph saying, 'Now, reader, you have all the clues. What is the solution?'"

"What good will that do?" somebody asked.

"My readers are all very smart," said Hillary. "They will solve the case. We just ask one of them how she did it."

Nora Woof opened her eyes, puffed her lips, and came as near to smiling as she ever did. "It would work, too," she muttered. "Unfortunately, by the time your story got published somebody else probably would have grabbed the reward. Anyway, I'm sure you are putting us on, dear Hillary, and just, by the way, have got in a plug for your next book, *Murders at the United Notions.*"

"There are no murders in this case," somebody observed.

"Don't worry," said Nora, closing her eyes again. "Our fictioneer colleague has a wonderful imagination."

A discreet tap on the front door was heard. May Gray, who was nearest, opened the portal and Moe the Mimic entered McNertney's. An amazing transformation had taken place. He looked so much like Hercula Parrot that even Tabitha Grisley couldn't have told the difference. Moreover, he was able to pitch his voice in a feminine register—he had been a boy soprano in a choir before he turned to a life of crime.

"Here's our guest of honor!" exclaimed the chairperson. "Mme. Parrot, we are most honored to have you join us."

Moe, dressed as Hercula, responded, "Zut alors! Mesdames, it is *I* who am honored to be with *you*, the second-best detectives in all the world."

"Who's the first best?" asked Nora.

"Le modesty prevents me to say."

Several whispered, "That's typical of Parrot, by Georgiana!"

A résumé covering the purpose of the gathering plus details of the million-dollar

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mystery was given for the guest's benefit.

"It is a case beaucoup intéressant," said the bogus Hercula. "Of course, I have used the little gray cells. I know exactly who is le miscreant and where ze loot reposes itself."

Nora opened her baleful eyes and said, "Okay, if you're so brainy, tell us."

"Ah, mes amies, I could do that of a truth. But would it not be better if you, the leading detectives of Etats Unis and Britain Great, work it out for yourselves?"

Some signs of dismay were heard, but not from Hillary Quinn who, looking amused, said, "Frenchy, you are kind to give us our chance. And I, for one, accept the challenge. For starters, I say it was an inside job and the robber was a man."

"Cherchez l'homme! You use the little gray cells tres formidable. But what is le nomme of le homme?"

"That's easy, Hercula," declared Nora Woof. "Obviously it's Philip D. Box."

"Mon dieu et filet mignon!" cried the phony Hercula. "You are le wizard. But now let us see if you can also tell where le spondulix is cached?"

"She's a phony," whispered Nora to Hillary.

Hillary agreed. "But let's just be positive."

She suggested a smoke during further mediation and tossed a lighter into the lap of "Hercula Parrot" who clapped knees together as it landed. Samantha Shovel told "Hercula," "My contact lenses have fallen out. Would you thread this needle for me?" Moe obliged. Then, as if on cue, Micheline Hammer handed an ashtray to the guest and requested, "Would you throw this at yonder rat? I sprained my arm." The ashtray blammed the rat squarely in the noggin, giving him a headache.

Boston Blondie, as chairperson, observed these actions. At a nod from Hillary she resumed her duties as conductor of the meeting and recognized Goldilock Homes who, wearing her doestalker cap and fiddling on a violin, mused, "Pure deductive reasoning tells us that, since the stolen money has not yet left the building, Philip D. Box must have hidden it in a Monotony box, replacing the play money."

"That's it!" drawled Violet Pantz. "Later, after the hue and cry dies down, he plans to mail it to himself!"

"Please to be complimented on le magnifique use of your little gray cells," exclaimed the bogus Hercula. "That is exactly the solution I myself worked out." She beamed at the group.

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Then frowning, looking at her watch, "Chevrolet coopay! I'm late for, how do you say, ze appointment. Pardon mille fois but I must be leaving!"

Nora Woof imposed her bulk between "Hercula" and the door. Micheline stepped forward with a ladylike fist cocked. Samantha slipped a derringer out of her bra holster. Boston Blondie snatched the wig from the imposter's bald head.

"Hah! I recognize you!" came from Simone Tempter, the Scent. "You're Moe the Mimic!"

Hell hath no fury like a bunch of women from whom you have tried to bilk a million dollars, and Moe knew it. He gave up meekly, told them where he had left the real Hercula, and submitted quietly to handcuffs when a pair of sturdy meter maids from headquarters came to lead him off to a little gray cell.

Micheline and Samantha went to round up the suspect, Philip D. Box, who, when confronted, confessed readily, saying he had stolen the money for his poor old widowed mother who had suffered recent heavy losses at bingo.

Meanwhile, a committee of six, headed by Boston Blondie, went to collect the bounty. The stolen money was, indeed, found in a Monotony box and the head of the company, Herbert J. Monotony, gladly handed over $1,000,000 after first asking the ladies if they wouldn't rather have the reward in yo-yos.

Femme detectives are different from homme detectives and viva la différence. But in one respect they are the same. After a case is ended, they sit around and hash over the clues. The genuine guest of honor, who had been rescued from the abandoned warehouse, now joined them.

Goldilock Homes started. "The sinister Moe kept his eyes on the lists of distinguished visitors to these shores. Hercula Parrot's name attracted his attention—what was she doing here? Using his specialty, he posed as a chambermaid and overheard a phone conversation relating to the secret SECs meeting and its purpose. His evil brain then concocted a plot diabolical in its simplicity. In disguise he would join us, pick our brains for the solution of the mystery, and then, with the excuse of a pressing engagement, rush off to collect the reward. The game was afoot!"

"And she came within an ace of getting away with it," Samantha Shovel said.

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"Pfui!" pfuied Nora Woof. "The moment that person walked in the door I spotted an impostor. In her coiffeur there was one hair out of place. The real Hercula is nothing if not neat."

"Of a certitude," agreed Mme. Parrot in person.

"And as a test I called her 'Frenchy,'" Hillary said. "There was no reaction. It's widely known that Hercula Parrot raises the roof if anybody implies that she is French rather than Belgian."

"Vraiment," said the guest of honor, in Belgian.

"And, of course, we then collaborated in a series of tests that proved beyond doubt the impostor was a male. He caught a cigarette lighter in his lap by banging his knees together, instead of separating the knees, the way one of us does; he threaded a needle by holding the thread still and bringing the needle up to it, instead of the other way round; and he threw an object at a rat in a manner worthy of Tom Seaver, a male baseball pitcher. All acts most unladylike. One of our greatest American books gave us these tipoffs."

"Quel book is that?"

"Why, of course, it's *The Adventures of Honeybear Finn* by Marcella Twain."

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

15 NEW stories — including

HUGH PENTECOST *(about Jericho)*

MICHAEL GILBERT *(about Inspector Petrella)*

EDWARD D. HOCH *(about Captain Leopold)*

LILLIAN de la TORRE *(about Dr. Sam Johnson)*

and something "special"— a NEW story by

PHILIP MacDONALD *(about — you'll be surprised!)*

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a *NEW* crime story by

JAMES POWELL

Judge Watford and Prosecutor Alcott had, between them, put McSorley in prison. McSorley had been one of the two Shouting Bandits, but the charge against him, and the conviction for it, had not been for bank robbery; it had been for murder . . . Once again, James Powell's own, personal, individualistic, and distinctive brand of mystery . . .

A MURDER COMING

by JAMES POWELL

Fog is always over there and never here. When the man in the fur-collared overcoat and homburg reached the CNR tracks, the fog had moved to the edge of the lake. When he reached the lake and the sagging wharf, the fog stood a bit off from shore.

For a moment the man stared fretfully out across the water. Then he noticed someone on the edge of the fog at the end of the wharf and quickly picked his way out to him. "Did Alcott send you for me?" he asked. "My name is Watford."

The other man was staring down into a rowboat. He looked up slowly. His face was broad and stubbled with white. "No," he said. His breath smelled of alcohol.

"Damn!" muttered Watford and hurled a ball of paper off into the fog. ("Would you mind delivering this, Judge?" the stationmaster had asked, handing Watford his own telegram in which he had answered Alcott's curious wire and announced his arrival time.) The fine, drifting rain had started up again. "Five dollars to row me out there," said Watford. The man looked at him with soft unblinking eyes. Watford drew a banknote from his wallet and held it under the man's nose. "If you don't know where Alcott's place is, I can show you," he said.

"Not many people on the

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islands this time of year," said the man.

"Five dollars," said Watford, who didn't care to discuss the comings and goings of a future provincial minister of justice with a local inhabitant.

The man shrugged and tucked the money in a pocket of his mackinaw. He stepped down into the boat and drew it up tight against the pilings. With a strong hand under Watford's elbow, he helped—almost lifted—him down. Then, as his passenger arranged himself in the bow, the man untied the boat and pushed off. Before the oars were in their locks the fog had closed in and the wharf had disappeared.

Now nothing was visible beyond the boat except a dark rim of water tufted with mist. At intervals shapes emerged from the fog and then slipped back into it. Watford, who felt the cold off the water almost at once, hunched inside his coat and thought of crocodiles and Loch Ness. "Your boat's taking water," he said suddenly, noticing the water lapping around his dapper little feet.

The man at the oars had been watching him with an expression as placid as a cow's. Now he shook his head.

"Don't tell me all this is from the rain," insisted Watford.

The man shook his head. "The boat's taking water."

"That's what I said," snapped Watford.

The man shook his head again. "It's not my boat."

Watford frowned. "Well, we could still use a can or something to bail with," he said uneasily.

"Try your hat," the man suggested.

As he groped for a cutting reply, it occurred to Watford that the man wasn't staring as much as offering his face to be recognized. "Have you and I met before?" he asked.

"You once sentenced me to be hanged, Judge," said the man. "If you call that a meeting."

Watford leaned forward curiously, searching the slack cheeks, the pitted skin, the water-blue eyes. The man grinned shyly. Then, holding the oars in his armpits, he took a drink from a bottle in a brown paper bag. Watford refused the bottle with a disdainful shake of the head. Then he shook his head again, perplexed.

The man started to row again. "Edward McSorley," he said.

"Ah, yes," said Watford In the late forties McSorley, a smalltown hardware-store owner, had been convicted of the

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murder of his wife. In the course of the trial it was also revealed that the McSorleys were The Shouting Bandits, bank robbers whose brief career had made them the darlings of the southern Ontario press. In fact, McSorley claimed his wife wasn't dead but had run off with their accumulated loot.

Abruptly Watford gave a dry laugh. "McSorley, do you remember the witness, the neighbor who saw you through the window come up behind your wife that night and choke her with your arm? Do you remember how you answered him when you took the stand? You said—"

"My wife is a judo expert," repeated McSorley gravely. "I often let her practise on me after dinner."

Watford forced a frown. "Not that I approve the commuting of your sentence, McSorley," he said. "The death penalty is a last bastion of the grand style in this all too colorless world. In his heart even the simplest of murderers sees the justice of an eye for an eye. Isn't that so?"

"Don't look at me. I didn't kill my wife," said McSorley.

"I had hoped we could speak frankly," said Watford. "After all, you've served your time." He paused. "You have, haven't you?"

"Twenty-five years," said McSorley, peering over his shoulder into the fog.

"Good for you," said Watford. "But now that the time has come to rehabilitate yourself, here's a tip: talk about the bloody deed at the drop of a hat. I mean it. If you ask me, our prisons should emphasize the teaching of communications skills—public speaking, first-person narrative, dramatic reading with gestures, and all. You see, so few of us actually get to kill in white heat. The man on the street thirsts to know what it's like. I confess to a certain curiosity myself."

McSorley rested on his oars. "Maudie's still alive," he said. "And the only thing I learned in prison was this." He lunged forward, a hunting knife in his upraised hand. Wide-eyed with fear, Watford fell backward across the bow. The knife arced down and stopped just short of his throat. "I learned you don't do it like that," said McSorley. With one hand he pulled Watford back into his seat. "You come up like this." He arced the knife up from the bottom of the boat and pressed it against Watford's stomach "Want me to go through that one more time?" he asked earnestly. "Are you sure you got it?"

"I got it," said Watford.

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McSorley looked at him doubtfully. After a moment he said, "I guess you'd better do some bailing." Watford crushed his homburg into a scoop and started throwing water over the side. McSorley watched, mildly interested, lounging back on his seat, legs crossed and an elbow on the gunwale. He took a drink, then another.

Watford bailed. "You have to admit you had a fair trial," he said hurriedly, regretting the squeak in his voice. "Eminently fair, as I recall. The evidence was all there. Oh, perhaps Brownish could have made more of prosecution's failure to positively identify those bone fragments in the incinerator as your wife's."

"He giggled a lot," observed McSorley.

"Yes," panted Watford as he bailed, "Brownish was famous for his little giggling fits in the courtroom. But he came from a fine family. We all forgave him a lot for that. Poor Brownish. He died several years ago, or perhaps you hadn't heard. Walked into an open manhole in broad daylight."

The boat was now bailed out. Watford's fingers were like sticks from the cold. The icy water had set his wrists aching. He started to throw the sodden wreckage of his hat over the side.

But McSorley wagged the knife. "Why don't you put it on?" he said.

Watford did. The leather sweatband made him shiver. Water trickled down his face and the back of his neck. He had the sudden urge to cry.

"Here's to Brownish," said McSorley, raising the bottle to his lips. "We're having a wonderful time and wish he was here." Then he handed the bottle to the unhappy Watford.

Watford braced himself, tilted the bottle, and choked in surprise. "Cognac?" he asked hoarsely, pulling down the bag to read the label.

"Special occasion," said McSorley.

As he handed the bottle back, Watford remembered with a start that it was Alcott who had prosecuted McSorley's case. He cleared his throat nervously and said, "Say, is this what you read about in books where the released murderer hunts down the person he's supposed to have killed and then murders him before the very eyes of the judge and prosecutor who convicted him? The ironic part, you see, is that he can't be tried twice for the same crime." He added almost hopefully, "Is that what all this is about?"

"I couldn't kill anybody," said McSorley. "I'm just not a

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violent person. Now, Maudie is a violent person. Once I saw her break a man's nose with her forearm." McSorley looked at the knife as though seeing it for the first time. He offered it to Watford. "Here," he said sheepishly, handing the judge the knife.

Watford's heart pounded. Was it a trick? He had to force himself to take the knife. Had McSorley just wanted to humiliate him? Clenching the knife, Watford looked the man in the eye defiantly and swept the wet homburg off his head and over the side. McSorley grinned meekly.

Breathing easier now, Watford said, "All right, let's get going. We can't sit here all afternoon." Watford had never ordered anyone to do something at knifepoint before. He found it strangely exhilarating. Frightened, he pushed the knife deep in his pocket and folded his arms. "What is it you want, McSorley?" he demanded.

McSorley rowed in silence. Finally he said, "At the trial nobody asked why we were called The Shouting Bandits."

"It was hardly relevant," said Watford. A small island with a single pine tree slid by in the fog. Alcott's island wasn't far now. "Proceed," said Watford. "Consider yourself asked."

"I guess the first time I met my wife is the best place to begin," said McSorley. "She was the new bank teller just arrived in town that day, a big-boned, broad-shouldered woman with this hard-of-hearing problem and a voice like a bugle. But too vain to wear a hearing aid. Funny, because she was plain as a post. Kicked out of the School of Library Science at the University of Western Ontario because of it—her hearing, not her looks." He faltered. "I'm not telling it right again," he said helplessly. "I guess maybe prisons should teach those communications skills you talked about."

McSorley pulled on the oars thoughtfully, as though ordering things in his mind. "Hardware stores smell of things with weight to them," he began again. "But banks smell like courtrooms, all paper and dried-up ink."

"More matter and less art, McSorley," said Watford.

"When my turn came at the teller's window that first day, Maudie blared right out, 'Speak up there, Mr. Man. You're not in church,' " said McSorley in a rush. "Everybody turned. The bank manager stuck his head out of his cubbyhole. But what really hit me like a load of bricks was that she was right. I mean I had been whispering in

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the bank all my life and so had my father before me.

"The next day, Sunday, I spent walking the few streets of the town trying to figure out what to do after two generations of whispering to put things right and become my own man again. All of a sudden there was Maudie coming out of Fallows Tourist Rooms carrying a fiber suitcase. The bank had fired her and she was going home to Sarnia.

"Well, there weren't any buses on Sundays, so I offered to drive her. It was in the car that I laughed and shouted and guessed the only way for me to get my own back was to rob the bank Maudie punched my arm and shouted that was the best damn idea she'd ever heard and to count her in. She felt banks had given her a raw deal. And libraries, too. But we both agreed there was more money in robbing banks.

"The next thing I knew I was visiting Maudie regularly in Sarnia where we'd sit around and shout about robbing banks. You wouldn't really think that could lead to wedding bells, but it did On our honeymoon we sneaked back to town in masks and robbed the bank. That's when she broke the bank manager's nose. He didn't jump when she shouted 'Jump!' A violent person, Maudie.

"For the next few months, Mondays meant close up the hardware store and rob a bank. But I'd had my fill. Nothing makes you speak right up in a bank like knowing you've robbed it. Besides, I was elected captain of the Northside-River Street-Merchants hockey team with Monday practises and a good chance that year of beating our Southside rivals. So I said, 'Hold the phone, Maudie.'

"She didn't like that a bit. I could hear it in her voice after dinner when she'd get me in a full nelson, snap my neck, and say, 'Tomorrow we're going to rob a bank. One and done.' 'No, now Maudie,' I'd say, 'enough's enough.' But love curdles fast when you've built a marriage on robbing banks."

"So you say she took all the money and ran," said Watford. "But why make it look as if you'd killed her?"

"Because I'm somebody to be reckoned with," insisted McSorley. "I rob banks just because I whispered in them. She had to be afraid of what a guy like that would do if she stole his share. So you were supposed to kill me But you didn't."

"God knows I tried," said Watford. "I wasn't the one who commuted your sentence "

"Anyway, the big question

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now in her mind is what a guy like me is going to do to make up for those twenty-five long years I spent in jail," said McSorley.

"So you've really found her then," said Watford.

"I put a private detective on that," said McSorley. "She owns a place called Echo Lake Lodge about forty miles from here—just a couple of ratty cabins for fishermen and a three-stool lunch counter." He smiled. "Tell you what I did: when I got out I bought an old car and paid her a visit, just a wave and a smile and hanging around outside, just giving her the jumps."

A dark shelf loomed ahead of them in the fog. Alcott's landing. "If that's what this is all about, I wouldn't advise you trying to harass Mr. Alcott and myself," warned Watford. "We have friends with the police who'd be happy to extend themselves on our behalf."

"I'm not going to bother you any more, Judge. Honest," promised McSorley. "Just let me finish what I was telling you. You see, I knew she couldn't take much of the waiting, and wondering what I was going to do. She'd have to come after me. And so there she was, padlocking the lunch-counter door behind her and there I was driving off in a cloud of dust. I let her chase me until I caught her, Judge. Now I've got her where she can't get away."

"Why tell me all this?" demanded Watford.

McSorley edged the boat up against the landing. "Because you're a judge," he said. "Because you say when people have the right to kill and when they don't."

"I've already told you you've got a murder coming, so to speak," said Watford, standing up.

McSorley helped him out of the boat and onto the landing. "The trouble is I'm just not a violent person," he said. "But I let her chase me until she could taste my blood and then I put her where she couldn't get away. When the police come looking they'll find her. Or her body."

Watford looked down at him. "Her body?" he asked.

McSorley grinned. "Well, you see, Judge, I told her a lie. I told her I'd hired a couple of guys to kill her."

"Figuring on scaring her to death?" asked Watford contemptuously. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and started to walk away. Then he stopped and pulled out the knife. "Here This is yours," he said.

But McSorley had already pushed off. "That's all right,"

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McSorley said gravely. "You just remember what I told you." He arced his fist down. "Not like that." He arced his fist up. "Like this. Mr. Alcott never did get that straight."

Watford gave a puzzled frown. Then something moved in the fog. Someone was coming down the landing toward him. "Alcott?" he called doubtfully, for Alcott was a small man with a quick step.

"Alcott?" he called again.

McSorley rested his oars and sat there on the edge of the fog. He held up the bottle in a little salute and before putting it to his lips said, "You'll have to shout louder than that, Judge. A lot louder than that."

Is this the shortest crime story ever written? Only 54 words...

IV, 8

by EDWARD WELLEN

SLAYER: There, I feel easier now. My wrath flew out of me with the stone I struck in his forehead. Come, my brother, rise up and let us go in out of the field. Why do you keep so still? Let me hear you breathe, let me feel your heart beat. Wake, Abel, wake.

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

This month, good brethren, the cards have been dealt in a somewhat different way. Though I can offer you only one detective novel, it is more than strengthened by three superior items of mystery-adventure-intrigue: all three British, all guaranteed sensational, the last-named a roaring chronicle of London in the early nineteenth century. That's no sales pitch, to which your mentor never descends; it's sober truth.

At the outset you may not expect *Someone's Death*, by Charles Larson (Lippincott, $5.95), to be a detective story of classic pattern, or in fact of any pattern. This "inside look at the television industry," background Hollywood, depicts an inferno in which only Producer Nils-Frederik Blixen—another private-eye series—retains some grip on sanity amid the uproar.

Blixen needs that sanity. With Joanna Redfern, his attractive casting director, accused of one brutal murder after another, this poor devil has even worse woes off camera. The cynical reader, exposed to so many television shows in which the solution of the mystery proves merely simple-minded or naive, need not fear to be let down at the finale. Mr. Larson, himself a writer-producer, has avoided every obvious trap. Zany characters or no, he has given us a sound, ingenious story with all the clues in sight.

As regards adventure-intrigue, mystery-spiced, you must try Gavin Lyall's *Blame the Dead* (Viking Press, $6.95), if you crave high-tension thrill.

James Card, formerly British Intelligence, travels from London to France as bodyguard of one Martin Fenwick, a mysterious businessman carrying a mysterious brown-paper parcel. In the Grand Place, Arras, Fenwick is shot to death from ambush. The parcel, saved and opened by Card, contains only a copy of the children's fare called "Bertie Bear's Coloring Book."

Actually, of course, it was supposed to contain some other book, worth the sacrifice of a dozen lives. At once James Card is flung into the realm of wealth and of marine insurance, with Fenwick's widow, his schoolboy son, and his insufferable partner,

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the savage-tempered Paul Mockby. He is also flung into a nightmare realm of abductions and punch-ups, carrying mayhem's trail from England and France to the port of Bergen in Norway.

The secret of an alcoholic ship's engineer is also the secret of a marine disaster, unrevealed until that last plot-twist amid flying bullets. And Gavin Lyall, always reliable, has surpassed even his outstanding performance in *Midnight Plus One.*

With *Snowline,* by Berkely Mather (Scribners, $6.95), we find our Welsh friend Idwall Rees once more at secret-service work under a tricky and treacherous boss called The Gaffer.

In India, Rees learns, Italian and Indian crime syndicates have organized gangs of outlandish but harmless-seeming hippies—hair, beads, and all—to smuggle base morphine from Calcutta to Marseilles in southern France. With their previous route through Turkey now blocked by the Turkish government, they have found some new drug-run as yet unknown to authority. Assisted or hampered by two Scotland Yard men from home, as well as by Safaraz, his trouble-making servant, Idwall Rees must find the new "snowline" and seal it up.

Though most hippies concerned are mere dupes or addicts—Pewsey Darrell *might* help Rees if she dared—like zombies they obey a murderous core whose leader, the Smiling One, is the most vicious of all. In disguise or out of it, with blood spurting from every side, Rees and Safaraz batter against obstacles fom Calcutta to a far, perilous place. There, with the whole scheme disclosed, the bad guys are squashed and the Smiling One gets his comeuppance. Polished dirty work, here recommended.

With no inhibitions of any kind, *Blackstone,* by Richard Falkirk (Stein and Day, $6.95), gustily recreates the crude, boisterous England of the year 1826, when George the Fourth still reigned. The king's only heir being Brother William, who has no legitimate issue, next in line for the throne will be seven-year-old Princess Alexandrina Victoria, daughter of the late Duke of Kent.

Is there in fact a plot to kidnap Princess Victoria from Kensington Palace? As guardian for this not-so-angelic child comes Edmund Blackstone, hardest nail of the Bow Street Runners, in a tale galloping with action towards its dramatic end. Such things never happened, let's admit. Yet to a student of history, remembering certain real-life characters involved, the near-successful kidnapping seems plausible after all.

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a TOMMY and TUPPENCE detective story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

In which Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, husband-and-wife founders of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives, a private inquiry agency, emulate The Master—yes, it was decidedly a Sherlock Holmes-type case. As Tommy put it: "You must often have noticed, in reading of crime, how one small detail is all the great detective needs to set him on the track. I may say that this case presents some unusual features."

THE CASE OF THE MISSING LADY

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

The buzzer on Mr. Blunt's desk—International Detective Agency, Manager, Theodore Blunt—uttered its warning call. Tommy and Tuppence Beresford both flew to their respective peepholes which commanded a vew of the outer office. There it was Albert's business to delay the prospective clients with various artistic devices.

"I will see, sir," he was saying. "But I'm afraid Mr. Blunt is very busy just at present. He is engaged with Scotland Yard on the phone just now."

"I'll wait," said the visitor. "I haven't got a card with me, but my name is Gabriel Stavansson."

The client was a magnificent specimen of manhood, standing over six feet tall. His face was bronzed and weatherbeaten, and the extraordinary blue of his eyes made an almost startling contrast to the brown skin.

Tommy swiftly made up his mind. He put on his hat, picked up some gloves, and opened the door. He paused on the threshold.

"This gentleman is waiting

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to see you, Mr. Blunt," said Albert.

A quick frown passed over Tommy's face. He took out his watch.

"I am due at the Duke's at a quarter to eleven," he said. Then he looked keenly at the visitor. "I can give you a few minutes if you will come this way."

The latter followed him obediently into the inner office where Tuppence was sitting demurely with pad and pencil.

"My confidential secretary, Miss Robinson," said Tommy. "Now, sir, perhaps you will state your business? Beyond the fact that it is urgent, that you came here in a taxi, and that you have lately been in the Arctic—or possibly the Antarctic, I know nothing."

The visitor stared at him in amazement.

"But this is marvelous," he cried. "I thought detectives only did such things in books! Your office boy did not even give you my name!"

Tommy sighed deprecatingly.

"Tut tut, all that was very easy," he said. "The rays of the midnight sun within the Arctic circle have a peculiar action on the skin—the actinic rays have certain properties. I am writing a little monograph on the subject shortly. But all this is wide of the point. What is it that has brought you to me in such distress of mind?"

"To begin with, Mr. Blunt, my name is Gabriel Stavansson—"

"Ah, of course," said Tommy. "The well-known explorer. You have recently returned from the region of the North Pole, I believe?"

"I landed in England three days ago. A friend who was cruising in Northern waters brought me back on his yacht. Otherwise I should not have got back for another fortnight. Now I must tell you, Mr. Blunt, that before I started on this last expedition two years ago I had the great good fortune to become engaged to Mrs. Maurice Leigh Gordon—"

Tommy interrupted. "Mrs. Leigh Gordon was, before her marriage—"

"The Honorable Hermione Crane, second daughter of Lord Lanchester," reeled off Tuppence glibly.

Tommy threw her a glance of admiration.

"Her first husband was killed in the War," added Tuppence.

Gabriel Stavansson nodded.

"That is quite correct. As I was saying, Hermione and I became engaged. I offered, of course, to give up this expedition, but she wouldn't hear of such a thing—bless her! She's

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the right kind of woman for an explorer's wife. Well, my first thought on landing was to see Hermione. I sent a telegram from Southampton, and rushed up to town by the first train. I knew that she was living for the time being with an aunt of hers, Lady Susan Clonray, in Pont Street, and I went straight there

"To my great disappointment I found that Hermy was away visiting some friends in Northumberland. Lady Susan was quite nice about it, after getting over her first surprise at seeing me—as I told you, I wasn't expected for another fortnight. She said Hermy would be returning in a few days' time. Then I asked for her address, but the old woman hummed and hawed—said Hermy was staying at one or two different places, and that she wasn't quite sure what order she was taking them in.

"I may as well tell you, Mr. Blunt, that Lady Susan and I have never got on very well. She's one of those fat women with double chins. I loathe fat women—always have—fat women and fat dogs are an abomination unto the Lord—and unfortunately they so often go together! It's an idiosyncracy of mine, I know—but there it is—I never can get on with a fat woman."

"Fashion agrees with you, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy dryly. "And everyone has their own pet aversion—that of the late Lord Roberts was cats."

"Mind you, I'm not saying that Lady Susan isn't a perfectly charming woman—she may be, but I've never taken to her. I've always felt, deep down, that she disapproved of our engagement, and I feel sure that she would influence Hermy against me if that were possible. I'm telling you this for what it's worth. Count it as prejudice, if you like.

"Well, to go on with my story, I'm the kind of obstinate brute who likes his own way. I didn't leave Pont Street until I'd got out of her the names and addresses of the people Hermy was likely to be staying with. Then I took the mail train North."

"You are, I perceive, a man of action, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy, smiling.

"The thing came on me like a bombshell. Mr. Blunt, none of these people had seen Hermy! Of the three houses only one had been expecting her—Lady Susan must have made a bloomer on the other two—and she had put off her visit there at the last moment by telegram. I returned posthaste to London, of course, and went straight to Lady Susan.

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"I will do her the justice to say that she seemed upset. She admitted that she had no idea where Hermy could be. All the same she strongly negatived any idea of my going to the police. She pointed out that Hermy was not a silly young girl, but an independent woman who had always been in the habit of making her own plans. She was probably carrying out some idea of her own.

"I thought it quite likely that Hermy didn't want to report all her movements to Lady Susan. But I was still worried. I had that queer feeling one gets when something is wrong. I was just leaving when a telegram was brought to Lady Susan. She read it with an expression of relief and handed it to me. It ran as follows: *Changed my plans. Just off to Monte Carlo for a week. Hermy.*"

Tommy held out his hand. "You have the telegram with you?"

"No, I haven't. But it was handed in at Maldon, Surrey. I noticed that at the time, because it struck me as odd. What should Hermy be doing at Maldon? She'd no friends there that I had ever heard of."

"You didn't think of rushing off to Monte Carlo in the same way that you had rushed North?"

"I thought of it, of course. But I decided against it. You see, Mr. Blunt, while Lady Susan seemed quite satisfied by that telegram, I wasn't. It struck me as odd that she should always telegraph, not write. A line or two in her own handwriting would have set all my fears at rest. But anyone can sign a telegram 'Hermy.' The more I thought it over, the more uneasy I got. In the end I went down to Maldon.

"That was yesterday afternoon. It's a fair-sized place—good links there and all that—two hotels. I inquired everywhere I could think of, but there wasn't a sign that Hermy had ever been there. Coming back in the train I read your advertisement and I thought I'd put it up to you. If Hermy has really gone off to Monte Carlo, I don't want to set the police on her track and make a scandal, but I'm not going to be sent off on a wild goose chase myself. I stay here in London, in case—in case there's been foul play of any kind."

Tommy nodded thoughtfully. "What do you suspect exactly?"

"I don't know. But I feel there's something wrong."

With a quick movement Stavansson took a case from his pocket and laid it open.

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"That is Hermione," he said. "I will leave it with you."

The photograph represented a tall willowy woman, no longer in her first youth, but with a charming frank smile and lovely eyes.

"Now, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy. "There is nothing you have omitted to tell me?"

"Nothing whatever."

"No detail, however small?"

"I don't think so."

Tommy sighed. "That makes the task harder," he observed. "You must often have noticed, Mr. Stavansson, in reading of crime, how one small detail is all the great detective needs to set him on the track. I may say that this case presents some unusual features. I have, I think, practically solved it already, but time will show."

He picked up a violin which lay on the table and drew the bow once or twice across the strings. Tuppence ground her teeth and even the explorer paled. The performer laid the instrument down again.

"A few chords from Mosgovskensky," he murmured. "Leave me your address, Mr. Stavansson, and I will report progress to you."

As the visitor left the office Tuppence grabbed the violin and putting it in the cupboard turned the key in the lock.

"If you must be Sherlock Holmes," she observed, "I'll get you a nice little syringe and a bottle labeled Cocaine, but for God's sake leave that violin alone. If that nice explorer man hadn't been as simple as a child he'd have seen through you. Are you going on with the Sherlock Holmes touch?"

"I flatter myself that I have carried it through very well so far," said Tommy with some complacence. "The deductions were good, weren't they? I had to risk the taxi. After all, it's the only sensible way of getting to this place."

"It's lucky I remember reading about his engagement in the *Daily Mirror*," remarked Tuppence.

"Yes, that looked well for the efficiency of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives. This is decidedly a Sherlock Holmes case. Even you cannot have failed to notice the similarity between it and the disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax."

"Do you expect to find Mrs. Leigh Gordon's body in a coffin?"

"Logically, history should repeat itself. Actually—well, what do you think?"

"Well," said Tuppence. "The most obvious explanation seems to be that for some reason or other Hermy, as he calls her, is afraid to meet her fiancé, and that Lady Susan is backing her

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up. In fact, to put it bluntly, she's come a cropper of some kind and has got the wind up about it."

"That occurred to me also," said Tommy. "But I thought we'd better make pretty certain before suggesting that explanation to a man like Stavansson. What about a run down to Maldon, old thing? And it would do no harm to take some golf clubs with us."

Tuppence agreeing, the International Detective Agency was left in the charge of Albert.

Maldon, though a well-known residential place, did not cover a large area. Tommy and Tuppence, making every possible inquiry that ingenuity could suggest, nevertheless drew a complete blank. It was as they were returning to London that a brilliant idea occurred to Tuppence.

"Tommy, why did they put Maldon, Surrey, on the telegram?"

"Because Maldon is in Surrey, idiot."

"Idiot yourself—I don't mean that. If you get a telegram from Hastings, say, or Torquay, they don't put the county after it. But from Richmond, they do put Richmond, Surrey. That's because there are two Richmonds."

Tommy, who was driving, slowed up.

"Tuppence," he said affectionately, "your idea is not so dusty. Let us make inquiries at yonder post office."

They drew up before a small building in the middle of a village street. A very few minutes sufficed to elicit the information that there were two Maldons. Maldon, Surrey, and Maldon, Sussex, the latter a tiny hamlet but possessed of a telegraph office.

"That's it," said Tuppence excitedly. "Stavansson knew Maldon was in Surrey, so he hardly looked at the word beginning with S. after Maldon."

"Tomorrow," said Tommy, "we'll have a look at Maldon, Sussex."

Maldon, Sussex, was a very different proposition from its Surrey namesake. It was four miles from a railway station, possessed two public houses, two small shops, a post and telegraph office combined with a sweets and picture-postcard business, and about seven small cottages. Tuppence took on the shops while Tommy betook himself to The Cock and Sparrow. They met half an hour later.

"Well?" said Tuppence.

"Quite good beer," said Tommy, "but no information."

"You'd better try The King's Head," said Tuppence. "I'm

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going back to the post office. There's a sour old woman there, but I heard them yell to her that dinner was ready."

She returned to the place and began examining postcards. A fresh-faced girl, still munching, came out of the back room.

"I'd like these, please," said Tuppence. "And do you mind waiting while I just look over these comic ones?"

She sorted through a packet, talking as she did so.

"I'm ever so disappointed you couldn't tell me my sister's address. She's staying near here and I've lost her letter. Leigh Wood, her name is."

The girl shook her head. "I don't remember it. And we don't get many letters through here either—so I probably should if I'd seen it on a letter. Apart from the Grange there isn't many big houses round about."

"What is the Grange?" asked Tuppence. "Whom does it belong to?"

"Dr. Horriston has it. It's turned into a nursing home now. Nerve cases mostly, I believe. Ladies that come down for rest cures, and all that sort of thing. Well, it's quiet enough down here, heaven knows." She giggled.

Tuppence hastily selected a few cards and paid for them. "That's Dr. Horriston's car coming along now" exclaimed the girl.

Tuppence hurried to the shop door. A small two-seater was passing. At the wheel was a tall dark man with a near black beard and a powerful, unpleasant face. The car went straight on down the street. Tuppence saw Tommy crossing the road toward her.

"Tommy, I believe I've got it. Dr. Horriston's Nursing Home."

"I heard about it at The King's Head and I thought there might be something in it. But if she's had a nervous breakdown or anything of that sort, her aunt and her friends would know about it surely."

"Ye-es. I didn't mean that. Tommy, did you see that man in the two-seater?"

"Unpleasant-looking brute, yes."

"That was Dr. Horriston."

Tommy whistled. "Shifty-looking beggar. What do you say about it, Tuppence? Shall we go and have a look at the Grange?"

They found the place at last, a big rambling house surrounded by deserted grounds, with a swift mill stream running behind the house.

"Dismal sort of abode," said Tommy. "It gives me the creeps, Tuppence. You know,

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I've a feeling this is going to turn out a far more serious matter than we thought at first."

"Oh, don't! If only we are in time. That woman's in some awful danger, I feel it in my bones."

"Don't let your imagination run away with you."

"I can't help it. I mistrust that man. What shall we do? I think it would be a good plan if I went and rang the bell alone first, and asked boldly for Mrs. Leigh Gordon just to see what answer I get."

Tuppence carried out her plan. The door was opened almost immediately by a man servant with an impassive face.

"I want to see Mrs. Leigh Gordon if she is well enough to see me."

She fancied that there was a momentary flicker of the man's eyelashes, but he answered readily enough.

"There is no one of that name here, Madam."

"Oh, surely. This is Dr. Horriston's place, The Grange, is it not?"

"Yes, Madam, but there is nobody of the name of Mrs. Leigh Gordon here."

Baffled, Tuppence was forced to withdraw and hold a further consultation with Tommy outside the gate.

"Perhaps he was speaking the truth. After all, we don't *know*," Tommy said.

"He wasn't. He was lying. I'm sure of it."

"Wait until the doctor comes back," said Tommy. "Then I'll pass myself off as a journalist anxious to discuss his new system of rest cure with him. That will give me a chance of getting inside and studying the geography of the place."

The doctor returned about half an hour later. Tommy gave him about five minutes, then he in turn marched up to the front door. But he too returned baffled.

"The doctor was engaged and couldn't be disturbed. And he never sees journalists. Tuppence, you're right. There's something fishy about this place. It's ideally situated—miles from anywhere. Any mortal thing could go on here and no one would ever know "

"Come on," said Tuppence, with determination.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to climb over the wall and see if I can't get up to the house quietly without being seen."

"Right. I'm with you."

The garden was somewhat overgrown, and afforded a multitude of cover. Tommy and Tuppence managed to reach the back of the house unobserved.

Here there was a wide

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terrace, with some crumbling steps leading down from it. In the middle some French windows opened onto the terrace, but they dared not step out into the open, and the windows where they were crouching were too high for them to be able to look in. It did not seem as though their reconnaissance would be much use when suddenly Tuppence tightened her grasp of Tommy's arm.

Someone was speaking in the room close to them. The window was open and the fragment of conversation came clearly to their ears.

"Come in, come in, and shut the door," said a man's voice irritably. "A lady came about an hour ago, you said, and asked for Mrs. Leigh Gordon?"

Tuppence recognized the answering voice as that of the impassive manservant.

"Yes, sir."

"You said she wasn't here, of course?"

"Of course, sir."

"And now this journalist fellow," fumed the other.

He came suddenly to the window, throwing up the sash, and the two outside, peering through a screen of bushes, recognized Dr. Horriston.

"It's the woman I mind most," continued the doctor. "What did she look like?"

"Young, good-looking, and very smartly dressed, sir."

Tommy nudged Tuppence in the ribs.

"Exactly," said the doctor between his teeth. "As I feared. Some friend of the Leigh Gordon woman's. It's getting very difficult. I shall have to take steps before—"

He left the sentence unfinished. Tommy and Tuppence heard the door close. There was silence.

Gingerly Tommy led the retreat. When they had reached a little clearing not far away, but out of earshot from the house, he spoke. "Tuppence, old thing, this is getting serious. They mean mischief. I think we ought to get back to town at once and see Stavansson."

To his surprise Tuppence shook her head.

"We must stay here. Didn't you hear him say he was going to take steps? That might mean anything."

"The worst of it is we've hardly got a case to go to the police on."

"Listen, Tommy. Why not ring up Stavansson from the village? I'll stay around here."

"Perhaps that is the best plan," agreed her husband. "But, I say—Tuppence—"

"Well?"

"Take care of yourself—won't you?"

"Of course I shall, you silly

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old thing. Cut along."

It was some two hours later that Tommy returned. He found Tuppence awaiting him near the gate.

"Well?"

"I couldn't get Stavansson. Then I tried Lady Susan. She was out, too. Then I thought of ringing up old Brady. I asked him to look up Horriston in the Medical Directory or whatever the thing calls itself."

"Well, what did Dr. Brady say?"

"He knew the name at once. Horriston was once a *bona fide* doctor, but he came a cropper of some kind. Brady called him a most unscrupulous quack, and said he, personally, wouldn't be surprised at anything. The question is, what are we to do now?"

"We must stay here," said Tuppence instantly. "I've a feeling they mean to do something tonight. By the way, a gardener has been clipping ivy round the house. Tommy, I *saw where he put the ladder.*"

"Good for you, Tuppence," said her husband appreciatively. "Then tonight—"

"As soon as it's dark—"

"We shall see—"

"What we shall see."

Tommy took his turn at watching the house while Tuppence went to the village and had some food.

Then she returned and they took up the vigil together. At nine o'clock they decided that it was dark enough to commence operations. They were now able to circle round the house in perfect freedom. Suddenly Tuppence clutched Tommy by the arm.

"Listen."

The sound she had heard came again, borne faintly on the night air. It was the moan of a woman in pain. Tuppence pointed upward to a window on the first floor.

"It came from that room," she whispered.

Again that low moan rent the stillness of the night.

The two listeners decided to put their original plan into action. Tuppence led the way to where she had seen the gardener put the ladder. Between them they carried it to the side of the house from which they had heard the moaning. All the blinds of the ground-floor rooms were drawn, but this particular window upstairs was unshuttered.

Tommy put the ladder as noiselessly as possible against the side of the house.

"I'll go up," whispered Tuppence. "You stay below. I don't mind climbing ladders and you can steady it better than I could. And in case the

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doctor should come round the corner you'd be able to deal with him and I shouldn't."

Nimbly Tuppence swarmed up the ladder and raised her head cautiously to look in at the window. Then she ducked swiftly, but after a minute or two brought her head very slowly up again. She stayed there for about five minutes. Then she descended again.

"It's her," she said breathlessly and ungrammatically, "but, oh, Tommy, it's horrible. She's lying there in bed, moaning, and turning to and fro—and just as I got there a woman dressed as a nurse came in. She bent over her and injected something in her arm and then went away again. What shall we do?"

"Is she conscious?"

"I think so. I'm almost sure she is. I fancy she may be strapped to the bed. I'm going up again, and if I can I'm going to get into that room."

"I say, Tuppence—"

"If I'm in any sort of danger I'll yell for you."

Avoiding further argument Tuppence hurried up the ladder again. Tommy saw her try the window, then noiselessly push up the sash. Another second and she had disappeared inside.

And now an agonizing time came for Tommy. He could hear nothing at first. Tuppence and Mrs. Leigh Gordon must be talking in whispers if they were talking at all. Presently he did hear a low murmur of voices and drew a breath of relief. But suddenly the voices stopped. Dead silence.

Tommy strained his ears. Nothing. What could they be doing?

Suddenly a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Come on," said Tuppence's voice out of the darkness.

"Tuppence! How did you get here?"

"Through the front door. Let's get out of this."

"Get out of this?"

"That's what I said."

"But—Mrs. Leigh Gordon?"

In a tone of indescribable bitterness Tuppence replied, "Getting thin!"

Tommy looked at her, suspecting irony.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Getting thin. Slinkiness. Reduction of weight. Didn't you hear Stavansson say he hated fat women? In the two years he's been away, his Hermy has put on weight. Got a panic when she knew he was coming back, and rushed off to do this new treatment of Dr. Horriston's. It's injections of some sort, and he makes a deadly secret of it, and charges through the nose. I daresay he *is* a quack—but he's

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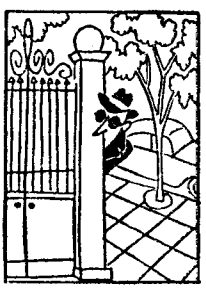
a damned successful one! Stavansson comes home a fortnight too soon, when she's only beginning the treatment. Lady Susan has been sworn to secrecy and plays up. And we come down here and make blithering idiots of ourselves!"

Tommy drew a deep breath. "I believe, Watson," he said with dignity, "that there is a very good concert at the Queen's Hall tomorrow. We shall be in plenty of time for it. And you will oblige me by not placing this case in your records. It has absolutely *no* distinctive features."



Sheriff versus outlaw. . .

THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

by EDWARD WELLEN

SHEEPHERDER: From this hilltop they look like mites way down there, but I can make them out by their clothing. They are so small I can weigh them in my hands. In my right hand, the sheriff and his posse; in my left hand, the outlaw and his band. Neither aware of the other. I need only move to either side of this crest to signal one without the other being the wiser—and the one will trap the other. What should I do? Nothing? To do nothing is to do something. The sun breaks through the clouds. The Lord is *my* shepherd. . .He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness. . .I know my duty—it is to warn Robin Hood.

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a NEW crime story by

ROBERT L. FISH

Introducing a new character—Johnny Steele, ex-con on parole, the man with the educated fingers who is an expert in recovering "lost" articles. But always with finesse—no violence, no safecracking, no armed holdup—just nimble fingers and nimble brain . . .

NO ROUGH STUFF

by ROBERT L. FISH

"Crooked dice!" Lou Reisman said to his partner, hanging up his hat. The two men were in the luxurious offices of Kramer & Reisman on Seventh Avenue in New York. Reisman had started talking as soon as he had entered; he went on as he headed for his desk. "The richest member of the club! It isn't even as if they rolled dice for dough; all they roll for is a lousy drink or two after a game. Anyway, the boys have been complaining, so I talked with Angie Martino in Shipping and he told me about this ex-con Johnny Steele who can open any lock there is. So I looked him up and last night I went to the club with him—I'm the president, right?—and he opened Max's locker in about two seconds flat—and you should have seen the lock Max had on it!—and—Sam! Are you listening to me?"

His partner studied him coldly.

"No," he said flatly. "So that's where you were last night. I tried calling you until after one."

Reisman frowned. "What about?"

"Trouble," Kramer said. "Big trouble." He sighed mightily. "You remember we had a style show here yesterday afternoon? Our new fall line?"

"Of course I remember."

"Which you were too busy to attend because you were all

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tied up with your stupid club business?"

"I was looking up this Johnny Steele," Reisman said evenly, refusing to be put on the defensive. "Anyway, what do I know about styles or shows? I'm the financial man in this partnership, Sam. You're the dress man."

"I'm the dress man," Sam Kramer repeated expressionlessly, and shook his head. "I'm the company idiot, that's what I am!"

A sudden chill touched Reisman's spine. "What happened? The show was a flop?"

"The show was the best we ever had, according to Joe. He—"

"According to *Joe?* You weren't there?"

"I'm trying to tell you," Kramer said. "Just when the show is about ready to start, I get a phone call. They said it was Wickersham Hospital and that Marge had been in an accident. Well, it's raining but I finally get a cab and we fight that damn traffic over to the East side, and when I get there they never even heard of Marge. Then I waste another hour chasing all over the place because I'm still not convinced they know who they've got there and who they haven't, before I get the brilliant brainstorm of calling home. And Marge never left the house all day."

He suddenly struck himself on the forehead with his clenched fist.

"Marge is always home on Tuesdays. Her weekly bridge game."

Reisman closed his eyes and opened them. He didn't know what was coming but he was sure he wouldn't like it. "And?"

"And," Kramer said grimly, "when I get back here the show's just finishing. A show we restrict to buyers we know, clients we can trust not to run down to the corner and order cheap copies the minute they leave—and who do I see walking out? With a grin on his face a mile wide? Al Gordon. From Mexico." He rubbed the spot on his forehead where he had struck himself. "I already fired the kid on the door who let him in."

"From Mexico?"

"That's right. Gordon's got a sweat-shop operation down there. He copies designs he swipes up here, uses cheap labor, pays the duty, and still lands his junk up here at half our cost." His big fist slammed on the desk. "And now he's got our entire fall line!"

"He can't remember every style he saw—"

"Remember?" Sam Kramer

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stared at his partner. "Where've you been since the Civil War? He's got a cord around his neck that goes down inside the front of his shirt. If he doesn't have a small Japanese camera there, I'll—I'll—I'll join your damn club!"

"So why didn't you stop him?"

"Stop him? He's got two goons standing outside the door when he comes out of the showroom, and they're on either side of him when he gets into the elevator grinning like a hyena. What am I supposed to be around here, a hero? Get my arm broken? Or my neck?"

"So what did you do?"

"So what the hell *could* I do?"

"You could have called the cops!" Reisman said angrily. "A guy steals designs it's the same thing as stealing anything else!"

"Call the cops!" Kramer shook his head pityingly at his partner, getting a bit of his own back. "You expect him to be waiting for the cops with the film on a silver platter all wrapped up in a signed confession? Who saw the camera? Nobody; I asked Joe. Who saw him take any pictures? None of our people; I asked. All we'd get would be slapped with a suit for false arrest. That's all we need. Call the cops!"

There were several moments of silence as the two men stared at each other morosely. Suddenly Lou Reisman snapped his fingers.

"Steele!" he said.

"Pure robbery," Kramer agreed bitterly.

"No, no! *Johnny* Steele, the guy who opened that locker for me last night. I had a beer with him afterwards. We had a long talk; he says he was framed into the pen and I believe him. Anyway, he's quite a guy. I know where he hangs out, or one of the places, anyway. He'll know what to do."

And Lou Reisman, even as he said it, was suddenly sure he was right.

Johnny Steele was watching a high-stake game of cribbage in the back room of Riley's bar when he was finally run to earth. Steele was watching the game rather than playing for two good reasons. One, he was not fundamentally a gambler, in that he didn't particularly care about winning, while he had a basic prejudice against losing. Two, nobody familiar with him would let him get his educated fingers within a city block of a deck of cards, even for fun.

He did not seem especially surprised when Reisman tapped him on the arm, and he allowed himself to be led back to the front of the bar and installed in

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a booth across from the two partners. Three beers were ordered and delivered, and Steele leaned back, prepared to listen.

He was a well-built man in his early thirties, with broad shoulders, thick black hair beginning to be prematurely flecked with gray, bushy slanting eyebrows over deep-set gray eyes, and a quizzical cast to his features, as if wondering what new gimmick life would try to slip over on him, and already calculating his response. He was dressed in a conservative gray suit, and his hands were forever restless. A matchbook appeared as if by magic between his strong fingers and then as quickly disappeared to be replaced by a shining quarter.

Sam Kramer watched, fascinated, as the matchbook and quarter alternately came and went while Lou Reisman explained the problem. When Reisman had finished, Steele allowed both the matchbook and quarter to disappear together, took a long draft of his beer, and frowned.

"You both realize, of course, that all this happened yesterday. The film could already be on its way to Mexico, airmail. Or on its way anywhere else."

Kramer brought his eyes up from the empty fingers almost reluctantly. He considered the question and then shook his head.

"No," he said. "You don't know Al. He doesn't trust anything or anybody. He'd never trust it to the mails, especially the Mexican mails. It might get lost, or he might not be there when it arrived. No. My guess is that the film is in the safe of some hotel and that it'll stay there until he leaves town."

"And when does he do that? Or is it possible he already has?"

"I doubt it," Kramer said. "Our show was the first of the season for the out-of-town buyers. Eisenberg and Burnstein have theirs today, and Sillman Brothers tomorrow. The others might not mean much to Gordon, but those two shows he'd want to see. And steal from."

Steele drank his beer and looked up.

"What's this Gordon look like?"

"A tall sour-faced creep," Kramer said bitterly. "Maybe six-one, six-two. Likes to dress flashy. Skinny but tough. He's half bald, even though he's not much over forty. What little hair he's got is blond and curly." He thought of something else. "He's also got two goons with him. My guess is

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they go everywhere he goes."

Steele nodded as he filed the information away. He considered the problem for several moments and then came to a decision. Whatever it was seemed to amuse him, for his lips twitched slightly and then straightened.

"All right," he said agreeably. "Five thousand dollars if I get the film back, plus any expenses. Deal?"

There was a moment's silence, then Reisman nodded. "Deal."

Sam Kramer frowned. If Steele got the film back, $5,000 was a bargain, but what were the chances, really? Sure, the guy was good at sleight of hand, and maybe he did break into some cheese-box golf locker; but—

"Hold it!" he said suddenly, one thought leading to another. "I hope you're not thinking of breaking into some hotel safe, or anything like that. We'd be—well, accessories, or something, and we're not about to agree to that. We're a respectable house, fifteen years in the business."

Steele smiled faintly. "I only break into safes with permission."

"And I certainly hope you're not thinking of guns or any rough stuff," Kramer added hastily, remembering the definition of an accomplice. "Guns, even empty guns, and somebody can get hurt. And we don't want anybody hurt, not even Al Gordon."

Steele's smile widened.

"My parole doesn't permit me to carry a gun," he said gently, "and personally I hate rough stuff."

"And no monkey business on airplanes. Or getting in trouble in Mexico. We do business there."

"I hate airplanes," Steele said honestly, "and my parole wouldn't permit me to leave the country if I wanted to."

Kramer frowned at him.

"And he's got those goons with him all the time," he said, his sharp eyes studying Steele's benign face. "My guess is they probably even sleep in the same room, or one of them, anyway. You can't get within a mile of him, so how are you going to get the film back?"

"It's a good question," Steele conceded, his eyes twinkling, a shiny dollar suddenly appearing in his fingers out of thin air.

The fifth telephone call located a Mr. Albert J. Gordon of Cuernavaca, Mexico, as being registered at the Philippe Hotel; it took only one call, with luck—to Aerolineas Mexicanas—to discover that an Albert J.

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Gordon had a reservation on the midnight flight the following evening, nonstop from Kennedy to Mexico City.

Johnny Steele had scarcely settled himself in a chair in the Philippe lobby that afternoon when a man answering Gordon's description entered and strode to the desk, accompanied by two rugged, taciturn men. Steele came to his feet easily and ambled past the trio, brushing past the guards in time to hear the clerk say, "Yes, sir, Mr. Gordon," and accept a small envelope for deposit in the hotel safe. Its bulk was consistent with a small roll of microfilm.

It was the necessary identification that Steele required. He also noted that the keen competition in the garment trade had obviously prevented a warning to be circulated to Eisenberg & Burnstein. The goons with Gordon were not known personally to Steele, but he was quite familiar with the type. Local talent, he was sure, hired on arrival and undoubtedly to be dismissed at the airport on departure. He smiled faintly and continued out to the street. One more errand and he would be ready to earn his fee.

At seven o'clock, his props all arranged and left in a small overnight bag in his apartment, Johnny Steele was back in Riley's bar, nursing a beer and watching the cribbage game, his assignment forgotten for the moment. A half dollar appeared in his fingers and rolled itself back and forth across his knuckles as he watched. It occurred to him that the penalty for cutting the deck in cribbage had to make it the easiest game in the world in which to cheat, and he wondered which ancient cardsharp had first made that rule a part of the game.

Al Gordon, his bags packed and ready to leave New York, was feeling a presentiment and he did not like it. He had stolen designs for too many years to start becoming nervous now, he told himself, but the feeling of dread persisted.

It was unfortunate that Kramer had returned from the hospital before Gordon could leave the showing; the show had been a long one and he shouldn't have waited until the end. Still, the fact that to date Sam Kramer had done nothing to try to recover the film was the very proof that there really wasn't much Sam could do. Unless, of course, Sam really hadn't recognized him, although that seemed hard to believe.

Still, if Kramer had intended to call the cops, he would have

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done it before now; and Sam was too chicken-hearted to hire any rough stuff. And what third choice was there? None. So why this silly feeling of nervousness?

Well, for one thing, because if he were in Sam Kramer's shoes he knew he would do something. He didn't know what, but definitely *something.* And for another, the period of maximum vulnerability would be from now until he entered the plane. He touched the padded handkerchief holding the three small rolls of microfilm, feeling the bulk in his pocket, and came to his feet, his two bodyguards following suit. Time to go.

He led the way from the room, the guards carrying his luggage, paid his bill, and made his way outside. He refused the taxi the Philippe doorman called up, preferring to select one himself from those cruising down Fifth Avenue, and climbed in between the two guards, his hand pressing all the while the valuable bulge in his pocket.

The trip to Kennedy was uneventful, but his nervousness unaccountably grew. They pulled up before the entrance to Aerolineas Mexicanas in the main terminal building, and Gordon entered closely flanked by the two thugs, his attaché case in one hand, his other hand plunged deep into the pocket with the film. The large bag was checked through, his seat assignment made, and the three men moved toward the first-class lounge. The bodyguards were under instructions from their boss to put the customer on the plane, and that meant *on* the plane, and not at the terminal entrance.

The lounge at this early hour was deserted except for a man in a sports jacket leafing through a magazine in one corner and the attendant polishing glasses behind the small stand-up bar. The three men moved toward this oasis automatically. The attendant put down his glass and turned to face them.

"Beer," said the two toughs in unison. Serious drinking on the job was forbidden.

"Not for me," Gordon said. The premonition of disaster was deepening. "Make it a Scotch. Straight. In fact, make it a double."

The attendant turned to the bottles on the shelf behind him, stretching for one. Gordon frowned. Was it possible that Kramer might have bribed the attendant to dope his drink? Ridiculous, he said to himself; you're getting positively senile. He reached for a handkerchief to pat his sweating brow, saw what he was holding, and

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jammed it back into his pocket, furious with himself. A second handkerchief supplied the need and he stared at the large glass of whiskey before him, nearly hypnotized by its amber color. The man on either side of him drank his beer thirstily. Suddenly Gordon relaxed.

Why hadn't Kramer tried to get the film back? The answer had to be that he *had* tried and failed. He had probably hired someone, warned him against any illegality such as safecracking or armed holdup, and expected results. He could picture Sam now, probably warning his man against trying any games on airplanes, or in foreign countries. Poor chicken-hearted Sam! And also, poor hired man, whoever he was, undoubtedly sitting around feeling frustrated and restricted. Without rough stuff what hope did he have? And now it was even too late for rough stuff; the plane departure was being announced at that moment.

Gordon smiled and picked up his whiskey, drinking it in quick swallows, feeling the welcome warmth instantly spreading through him and easing his tension. He turned to stare around the lounge. The place had filled up; people were shoving along the bar, anxious for a quick drink before takeoff, but his person was adequately protected by the two monoliths, one on each side.

A man in a sports jacket, bag in hand, was pushing through the door to the Men's Room; his corner had been taken by a mother attempting to bundle her three young children and their plane requirements into some form of transportable order. Gordon smiled; they would do as well as his bodyguards once he left them at the barrier.

The three men were side by side as Gordon checked through; he waited until the mother and her brood appeared before waving off his two guards and then placing himself in the midst of the three tired children. The two bodyguards remained, watching as the line inched patiently forward to boarding. The two kept their eyes rigidly on their customer until he had passed the sky-marshal inspection station and had moved to the door of the plane.

Gordon paused in the doorway, his hand once again gripping his precious handkerchief, and waved with his attaché case; then he had disappeared inside the plane, a triumphant grin on his face.

As he strapped himself into his seat and tightened the seatbelt, he promised himself a

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thorough medical checkup as soon as he got home. An attack of nerves like the one he had just suffered—and suffered needlessly—was something that had to be looked into at once. The Miami Beach style shows were scheduled for the following month, and he certainly didn't want to go through something like this again.

The three little tubes of microfilm stood side by side on Sam Kramer's desk. They had been carefully examined; they were quite authentic. Kramer was studying Steele's face with an expression as close to awe as he was capable of. Lou Reisman was smiling faintly, his faith in Johnny Steele justified. Steele, relaxing in a chair, was explaining in a soft voice.

"I was in the same cell as Billy Jenks for four years," he said, "until poor Billy took sick and died, but he taught me all he knew. And he knew plenty. For practice he'd ask a guard a question and I'd switch things from one of the guard's pockets to another while he was answering.

"I always felt," he went on, his smile fixed, his mind apparently far away, "that what Billy and I used to do was some sort of challenge. But a sky-marshal's inspection station at an airport these days? It's like having a license to steal. Can you imagine? A man standing before you, his hands in the air, asking you to run your hands up and down his clothes? And those poor inspectors are so busy that when a man in uniform—any uniform as long as it has a badge—appears and says he's been assigned to help, they're only too happy to have him."

Kramer sounded shocked. "You impersonated a cop?"

Steele shook his head.

"That would be against my parole," he said. "I used a School Guard's uniform, but it *did* have a badge."

"But how—?"

"Well," Steele said, serious again, "I was sure he wouldn't ship the film through in his luggage; you might have bribed one of the Aerolineas staff to search through it. The chances were against, but why take a chance at all? Nor did I feel he'd keep the film in his attaché case; if he fell asleep on the plane anyone might have opened it. No, the safest place he could think of was on his person, in his pocket with his hand holding it.

"I was also sure he'd have it wrapped in tissue, or a handkerchief, or in an envelope, to protect it from being scratched. And I had all three ready—tissue, handkerchief, en-

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velope. When he showed me in the lounge that it was a handkerchief and in which pocket, that helped, but it really wasn't necessary. The way sky marshals are permitted to frisk a person, I could have made the switch if he'd had it under his hat."

Steele shrugged, his eyes twinkling. "After that it was merely a matter of ducking into the Men's Room and changing clothes."

"Beautiful!" Reisman said, and glanced down at the expense account that Steele had given him. His eyebrows rose in honest surprise. "This is all?"

"That's it," Steele said. "Just a few cab fares and the uniform rental." He smiled and came to his feet. "I didn't charge you for the handkerchief I wrapped them in for the switch; I took that from one of Gordon's bodyguards back at the Philippe Hotel."

"Q"

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a *NEW* suspense story by

RUTH RENDELL

What might happen when a discharged employee's wife invites her husband's former employer to dinner, and the employer, who was solely responsible for the husband's dismissal, is foolish enough to accept the invitation? To an isolated Victorian house? On a stormy night? And the employer with a bad heart condition? And what was all this talk about "Macbeth"? . . .

TRAPPED

by RUTH RENDELL

They had been very pressing and at last, on the third time of asking, he had accepted. Resignedly, almost fatalistically, he had agreed to dine with them. But as he began the long drive out of London he thought petulantly that they ought to have had the tact to drop the acquaintanceship altogether.

No other employee he had sacked had ever made such approaches to him. Threats, yes. Several had threatened him and one had even tried blackmail, but no one had ever had the effrontery to invite him to dinner. It wasn't done. A discreet man wouldn't have done it. But of course Hugo Crouch wasn't a discreet man and that, among other things, was why he had been sacked.

He knew why they had asked him. They wanted to hold a court of inquiry, to have the whole thing out in the open. Knowing this, he had suggested they meet in a restaurant and at his expense. They couldn't harangue a man in a public restaurant and he wouldn't be at their mercy. But they had insisted he come to their house and in the end he had agreed. He was an elderly man with a heart condition; it was 16 miles slow driving from his flat to their house—monstrous on a filthy February

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night—but he would show them he could take it. The Chairman of the Board of Fraser's would show them he couldn't be intimidated by a bumptious do-gooder like Hugo Crouch, and he would cope with the situation just as he had coped in the past with the blackmailer.

By the time he reached the outskirts of the Forest, the rain was coming down so hard that he had to put his windshield wipers on at top speed, and he felt more than ever thankful that he had this new car with all its efficient gadgets. Certainly the firm wouldn't have been able to buy it if he had kept Hugo Crouch on a month longer. If he had acquiesced to all Hugo's demands he would still be stuck with that old Daimler and he would never have managed that winter cruise. Hugo had been a real thorn in the firm's flesh what with his extravagance and his choosing to live in a house in the middle of Epping Forest. And it was in the middle, totally isolated, not even on the edge of one of the Forest villages. The general manager of Fraser's had to be within reach, on call. Burying oneself out here had been ridiculous.

The car's powerful headlights showed a dark winding lane ahead, the gray tree trunks making it appear like some somber pillared corridor. And this picture was cut off every few seconds by a curtain of rain, to reappear with the sweep of the wipers. Fortunately he had been here once before, otherwise he might have passed the high brick wall and the wooden gates behind which stood the Crouch house, the peak-roofed Victorian villa, drab, shabby, and to his eyes quite hideous. Anyone who put a demolition order on this house would be doing a service to the environment, he thought as he drove in through the gates.

There wasn't a single light showing. He remembered that they lived in the rear, but they might have put a light on in front to greet him. But for his car headlights, he wouldn't have been able to see his way at all.

Clutching the box of peppermint creams he had brought for Elizabeth Crouch, he splashed across the almost flooded paving, under eaves from which water poured as from a row of taps, and made for the front door which happened to be—which *would* be—at the far side of the house. It was hard to tell where their garden and the Forest began, for no demarcation was visible. Nothing was visible but black rain-lashed branches, faintly illuminated by a dim glow showing through the

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transom over the door.

He rang the bell hard, keeping his finger on it, hoping the rain hadn't got through his coat to his hundred-guinea suit. A jet of water struck the back of his neck, sending a shiver through him, and then the door opened.

"Duncan! You must be soaked. Have you had a dreadful journey?"

He gasped out, "Awful, awful!" and ducked into the dry sanctuary of the hall. "What a night!" He thrust the chocolates at her and gave her his hand. Then he remembered that in the old days they always used to kiss. Well, he never minded kissing a pretty woman and it hadn't been her fault. "How are you, Elizabeth?" he said after their cheeks had touched.

"I'm fine. Let me take your coat. I'll take it into the kitchen and dry it. Hugo's in the sitting room. You remember your way, don't you?"

Down a long passage, he recalled, that was never properly lighted and wasn't heated at all. The whole place cried out for central heating. He was by now extremely cold and he couldn't help thinking of his flat where the radiators got so hot that you had to open the windows even in February and there, had he been at home, his housekeeper would at this moment be placing before him a portion of hot paté to be followed by Poulet San Josef. Elizabeth Crouch, he recalled, was rather a poor cook.

Outside the sitting room door he paused, girding himself for the encounter. He hadn't set eyes on Hugo Crouch since the man marched out of the office in a huff because he, Duncan Fraser, Chairman of Fraser's, had tentatively suggested that Crouch might be happier in another job.

Well, the sooner the first words were over the better. Very few men in his position, he thought, would let the matter weigh on their minds at all or have his sensitivity. Very few, for that matter, would have come here at all.

He would be genial, casual, perhaps a little avuncular. Above all, he would avoid at any cost the subject of Hugo's dismissal. They wouldn't be able to make him talk about it if he was determined not to; ultimately the politeness of hosts to guest would put up a barrier to stop them.

He opened the door, smiling pleasantly, achieving a merry twinkle in his eye. "Well, here I am, Hugo! I've made it."

Hugo wore a very sour look, the kind of look Duncan had often seen on his face when

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some more than usually extravagant order of his had been countermanded. He didn't smile. He gave Duncan his hand gravely and asked him what he would like to drink.

Duncan looked quickly around the room which hadn't changed and was still furnished with rather grim Victorian pieces. There was, at any rate, a huge fire of logs burning in the grate.

"Ah, yes, a drink," he said, rubbing his hands together. He didn't dare ask for whiskey, which he would have liked best, because his doctor had forbidden it. "A little dry Vermouth?"

"I'm afraid I don't have any Vermouth."

This rejoinder, though spoken quite lightly, though he had even expected something of the sort, gave Duncan a slight shock. It put him on his mettle and yet it jolted him. He had known, of course, that they would start on him quickly, but he hadn't anticipated the first move coming so fast. All right, let the man remind him he couldn't afford fancy drinks because he had lost his job. He, Duncan, wouldn't be drawn. "Sherry, then," he said. "You do have sherry?"

"Oh, yes, we have sherry. Come and sit by the fire."

As soon as he was seated in front of those blazing logs and had begun to thaw out, he decided to pursue the conversation along the lines of the weather. It was the only subject he could think of to break the ice until Elizabeth came in, and they were doing quite well at it, moving into such sidelines as floods in East Anglia and crashes in motorway fog, when she appeared and sat next to him.

"We haven't asked anyone else, Duncan. We wanted to have you to ourselves."

A pointless remark, he thought, under the circumstances. Naturally, they hadn't asked anyone else. The presence of other guests would have defeated their purpose. But perhaps it hadn't been so pointless, after all. It could be an opening maneuver.

"Delightful," he said.

"We've got such a lot to talk about. I thought it would be nicer this way."

"Much nicer." Such a lot to talk about? There was only one thing she could mean by that. But she needn't think—silent Hugo sitting there with his grim moody face needn't think—that he would help them along an inch of the way. If they were going to get onto the subject they would have to do all the spadework themselves.

"We were just saying," he

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said, "how tragic all these motorway crashes are. Now I feel all this could be stopped by a very simple method."

He outlined the simple method but he could tell they weren't really interested and he wasn't surprised when Elizabeth said, "That's fascinating, Duncan, but let's talk about you. What have you been doing lately?"

Controlling the business your husband nearly ruined. "Oh, this and that," he said. "Nothing much."

"Did you go on a cruise this winter?"

"Er—yes, yes I did. The Caribbean, as a matter of fact."

"That's nice. I'm sure the change did you good."

Implying he needed having good done to him, of course. She had only got onto cruises so that she could point out that some people couldn't afford them.

"I had a real rest," he said heartily. "I must just tell you about a most amusing thing that happened to me on the way home." He told them but it didn't sound very amusing and although Elizabeth smiled half-heartedly, Hugo didn't. "Well, it seemed funny at the time," he said.

"We can eat in five minutes," said Elizabeth. "Tell me, Duncan, did you buy that villa you were so keen on in the South of France?"

"Oh, yes, I bought it." She was looking at him very curiously, very impertinently really, waiting for him to apologize for spending his own money, he supposed. "Listen to that rain," he said. "It hasn't let up at all."

They agreed that it hadn't and a silence fell. He could tell from the glance they exchanged—he was very astute in these matters—that they knew they had been baulked for the time being. And they both looked pretty fed-up, he thought triumphantly. But the woman was weighing in again and a bit nearer the bone this time.

"Who do you think we ran into last week, Duncan? John Church."

The man who had done that printing for Fraser's a couple of years back. He had got the order, Duncan remembered, just about the time of Hugo's promotion. He sat tight as he drank the last of his sherry.

"He told us he'd been in the hospital for months and lost quite a lot of business. I felt so—"

"I wonder if I might wash my hands," Duncan asked firmly. "If you could just tell me where the bathroom is?"

"Of course." She looked

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disappointed, as well she might. "It's the door facing you at the top of the stairs."

Duncan made his way to the bathroom. He mustn't think he was going to get off the hook as easily as that. They would be bound to start in on him again during the meal. Very likely they thought the dinner table a good place to hold an inquest. Still, he'd be ready for them; he'd done rather well up to now.

They were both waiting for him at the foot of the stairs to lead him into the dining room and again he saw the woman give her husband one of those looks that are the equivalent of prompting nudges. Hugo was probably getting cold feet. In these cases, of course, it was always the women who were more aggressive. Duncan gave a swift glance at the table and the plate of hors d'oeuvres—sardines, anchovies, and artichoke hearts, none of which he liked.

"I'm afraid you've been to a great deal of trouble, Elizabeth," he said graciously.

She gave him a dazzling smile. He had forgotten that smile of hers—how it lit her whole face, her eyes as flashing blue as a kingfisher's plumage. "'The labor we delight in,'" she said, "'physics pain.'"

"Ah, *Macbeth.*" Good, an excellent topic to get them through the first course. "Do you know, the only time we three ever went to the theater together was to see *Macbeth?*"

"I remember," she said. "Bread, Duncan?"

"Thank you. I saw a splendid performance of *Macbeth* by that Polish company last week. Perhaps you've seen it?"

"We haven't been to the theater at all this winter," said Hugo.

She must have kicked him under the table to prompt that one. Duncan took no notice. He told them in detail about the Polish *Macbeth*, although such was his mounting tenseness that he couldn't remember half the names of the characters or, for that matter, the names of any of the actors.

"I wish Keith could have seen it," she said. "It's the play for his exam."

She was going to force him to ask after her sons and be told they had had to take them away from that absurdly expensive boarding school. Well, he wouldn't. Rude it might be, but he wouldn't ask.

"I don't think you ever met our children, Duncan?"

"No, I didn't."

"They'll be home for half-term holiday next week. I'm so delighted that their holiday

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happens to coincide with mine."

"Yours?" he said suspiciously.

"Elizabeth has gone back to teaching."

"Really?" said Duncan. "No, I won't have any more thank you. That was delicious. Let me give you a hand. If I could carry something—?"

"Please don't trouble. I can manage." She looked rather offended. "If you two will excuse me I'll see to the main course."

He was left alone with Hugo in the chilly dining room. He shifted his legs from under the tablecloth to bring them closer to the one-bar electric heater. Hugo began to struggle with the cork of the wine bottle. Unable to extract it, he cursed under his breath.

"Let me try."

"I'll be able to cope quite well, thanks, if you don't watch me," said Hugo sharply, and then, irrelevantly if you didn't know that nothing those two said was irrelevant, "I'm taking a course in accountancy."

"As a wine waiter, Hugo" said Duncan, "you make a very good accountant, ha ha!"

Hugo didn't laugh. He got the cork out at last. "I think I'll do all right. I was always reasonably good at figures."

"So you were, so you were. And more than reasonably good." That was true. It had been with personnel that the man had been so abysmally bad giving junior executives and typists ideas above their station. "I'm sure you'll do well."

Why didn't the woman come back? It must have been ten minutes since she had gone off to the kitchen down those miles of hallways. His own wife, long dead would have got that main course into serving dishes before they had sat down to the hors d'oeuvres.

"Get a qualification that's the thing," Duncan said. In the distance he heard the wheels of a serving table coming. It was a more welcome sound than that of the wheels of a train one has awaited for an hour on a cold platform. He didn't like the woman but anything was better than being alone with Hugo.

Why not get it over now, he thought, before they began on the amazingly small roasted chicken which had appeared? He managed a smile. He said, "I can tell you've both faced the situation squarely. I'm quite sure, Hugo, you'll look back on all this when you're a successful accountant and thank God you and Fraser's parted company."

And that ought to be that. They had put him through their inquisition and now perhaps

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they would let him eat in peace this overcooked mess that passed for a dinner. At last they would talk of something else, not leave it to him who had been making the conversation all the evening.

But instead of further conversation, there was a deep silence. No one seemed to have anything to say. And although Duncan, working manfully at his chicken wing, racked his brains for a topic, he could think of nothing. Their house, his flat, the employees at Fraser's, his new car, the high cost of living, her job, Hugo's course, Christmas past, summer to come—all these subjects must inevitably lead by a direct or indirect route back to Hugo's dismissal. And Duncan saw with irritable despair that *all* subjects would lead to it because he was he and they were they and the dismissal lay between them like an unavoidable specter at their dismal feast.

From time to time he lifted his eyes from his plate, hoping that she would respond to that famous smile of his, that smile that was growing stiff with insincere use; but each time he looked at her he saw that she was staring fixedly at him, eating hardly anything, her expression concentrated, and somehow dogged. And her eyes had lost their kingfisher flash. They were dull and dead like smoky glass.

So they hadn't had enough then, she and her subdued and morose husband? They wanted to see him abject, not merely referring with open frankness to the dismissal as he had, but explaining it, apologizing. Well, they should have his explanation. There was no escape.

Carefully he placed his knife and fork side by side on his empty plate. Precisely, but very politely, he refused his hostess' offer of more. He took a deep breath as he often did at the beginning of a board meeting, as he had so very often done at those board meetings when Hugo Crouch pressed insistently for staff raises.

"My dear Elizabeth," he began, "my dear Hugo, I know why you asked me here tonight and what you've been hinting at ever since I arrived. And because I want to enjoy your very delightful company without any more awkwardness, I'm going to do here and now what you very obviously want me to do—that is, explain just how it happened that I suggested Hugo would be happier away from Fraser's."

Elizabeth said, "Now, Duncan—"

"You can say your piece in a moment, Elizabeth. Perhaps you'll be surprised when I

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admit that I am entirely to blame for what happened. Yes, I admit it, the fault was all mine." He lifted one hand to silence Hugo who was shaking his head vehemently. "No, Hugo, let me finish. As I said, the fault was mine. I made an error of judgment. Oh, yes, I did. I should have been a better judge of men. I should have been able to see when I promoted you that you weren't up to the job. I blame myself for not understanding—well, your limitations."

They were silent. They didn't look at him or at each other.

"We men in responsible positions," he said, "are to blame when the men we appoint can't rise to the heights we envisage for them. We lack vision, that's all. I take the whole burden of it on my shoulders, you see. So shall we forgive and forget? Let bygones be bygones?"

He had seldom seen people look so embarrassed, so shame-faced. It just went to show they were no match for him. His statement had been the last thing they had expected and it was unanswerable. He handed her his plate with its little graveyard of chicken bones among the potato skins and as she took it he saw a look of baulked fury cross her face.

"Well, Elizabeth," he said, unable to resist, "am I forgiven?"

"It's too late now. It's past," she said in a very cold, stony voice. "It's too late."

"I'm sorry if I haven't given you the explanation you wanted, my dear. I've simply told you the truth."

She didn't say any more. Hugo didn't say anything. And suddenly Duncan felt most uncomfortable. Their condemning faces, the way they both seemed to shrink away from him, was almost too much for him. His heart began to pound and he had to tell himself that a racing heart meant nothing, that it was pain and not palpitations he must fear. He reached for one of his little white pills ostentatiously, hoping they would notice what they had done to him.

When still they didn't speak, he said, "I think perhaps I should leave now."

"But you haven't had coffee," said Elizabeth.

"Just the same, it might be better—"

"Please stay and have coffee," she said firmly, almost sternly, and then she forced a smile. "I insist."

Back in the sitting room they offered him brandy. He refused it because he had to drive home, and the sooner he

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could begin that drive the happier he would be. Hugo had a large brandy which he drank at a gulp, the way brandy should never be drunk unless one has had a shock or was steeling oneself for something. Elizabeth had picked up the evening paper and was talking in a very artificial way about a murder case which appeared on the front page.

"I really must go," said Duncan.

"Have some more coffee? It's not ten yet."

Why did they want him to stay? Or, rather, why did she? Hugo was once more busy with the brandy bottle. He would have thought his company must be as tiresome to them as theirs was to him. They had got what they wanted, hadn't they? He drank his second cup of coffee so quickly that it scalded his mouth, and then he got up.

"I'll get an umbrella. I'll come out with you," said Hugo.

"Thank you." It was over. He was going to make his escape and he need never see them again. And suddenly he felt that he couldn't get out of that house fast enough. Really, since he had made his little speech, the atmosphere had been thoroughly disagreeable.

"Good night, Elizabeth," he said. What platitudes could he think of that weren't too ludicrous? "Thank you for the meal. Perhaps we may meet again someday."

"I hope we shall and soon, Duncan," she said, but she didn't give him her cheek. Through the open door the rain was driving in against her long skirt. She stood there, watching him go out with Hugo, letting the light pour out to guide them round the corner of the house.

As soon as he was round that corner, Duncan felt an unpleasant jerk of shock. The headlights of his car were blazing, full on.

"How did I come to do a thing like that?"

"I suppose you left them on to see your way to the door," said Hugo, "and then forgot to turn them off."

"I'm sure I did *not*."

"You must have. Hold the umbrella and I'll try the ignition." Leaving Duncan on the flooded path under the inadequate umbrella, Hugo got into the driver's seat and inserted the ignition key. Duncan, stamping his feet impatiently, watched "Not a spark," said Hugo. "Your battery must be almost dead."

"It *can't* be."

"I'm afraid it is. Try for yourself."

Duncan tried, getting very wet in the process.

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"We'd better go back in the house. We'll get soaked out here."

"What's the matter?" said Elizabeth, who was still standing in the doorway.

"His battery's dead. The car won't start."

Of course it wasn't their fault but somehow Duncan felt it was. It had happened at their house to which they had fetched him for a disgraceful purpose. He didn't bother to hide his annoyance. "I shall just have to borrow your car, Hugo."

Elizabeth closed the door. "Hugo's car," she said quietly, "was Fraser's. If you remember, Duncan, he had a firm's car and had to give it back."

Duncan couldn't remember. How could he be expected to have all those minor details at his fingertips? "I see," he snapped. "Then if I might just use your phone I'll ring for a hire car. I've a mini-cab number on me." Her expression told him that wasn't going to be possible either. "Don't tell me your phone also belonged to Fraser's."

"No, but they paid for it," said Hugo "and we can't afford it any more. I'm sorry, Duncan, I don't know what you can do, but we may as well all go and sit down where it's warmer."

"I don't want to sit down. I have to get home." He shook off the hand Elizabeth had placed on his arm. "I must walk to the nearest house *with* a phone."

Hugo opened the door. The rain was more like a wall of water than a series of falling drops. "In this?"

"Then what am I supposed to do?" Duncan cried fretfully.

"Stay the night," said Elizabeth calmly. "I really don't know what else you can do but stay the night."

The bed was just what he would have expected a bed in the Crouch ménage to be, hard, narrow, and cold. She had given him a hot-water bottle which was an object he hadn't set eyes on in ten years. And Hugo had lent him a pair of pajamas.

All the time this was going on he had protested that he couldn't stay, that there must be some other way, but in the end he had yielded. Not that they had been welcoming. They had treated the whole thing rather as if—well, how had they treated it? Duncan lay in the dark, the hot-water bottle between his knees, and tried to assess just what their attitude had been. Fatalistic, he thought, that was it. They had behaved as if all this were inevitable, that there was no escape, and here he must stay

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Escape was a ridiculous word, of course, but it was the sort of word you used when you were trapped somewhere for a whole night in the home of people who were obviously antagonistic, if not hostile. Why had he been such a fool as to leave those car lights on? He couldn't remember that he had done so and yet he must have. Nobody else would have turned them on. Why should they?

He wished they would go to bed, too That they hadn't he could tell by the light, the rectangle of dazzlement, that showed round the frame of his bedroom door. And he could hear them talking below, not the words but the buzz of conversation. These late Victorian houses were atrociously built, of course. You could hear every sound. The rain drumming on the roof sounded as if it were pounding on cardboard rather than on slates.

He didn't think there was much prospect of sleep. How could he sleep with the noise and all that was on his mind, the worry of getting the car moved, of finding some way of getting to the office? And it made him feel very uneasy their staying up like that, particularly as she had said, "If you'll go into the bathroom first, Duncan, we'll follow you."

Follow him! That must have been all of half an hour ago. He pressed the switch of his bedlamp and saw that it was 11:30. Time they were in bed if she had to get to her school in the morning and he to his accountancy course.

Once more in the dark, but for that gold-edged rectangle, he considered the question of the car lights again. He was certain he had turned them out. Of course it was hard to be certain of anything when you were so upset. The pressure they had put on him had been simply horrible and the worst moments were those when he had been alone with Hugo while that woman was fishing the ancient pullet she'd dished up to him out of her oven. Really, she had been a hell of a long time getting that main course when you considered what it had amounted to. Could she have. . .?

Only a madwoman would do such a thing and what possible motive could she have had? But if you lived in a remote place and you wanted someone to stay in your house overnight, if you wanted to *keep* them there, how better than to immobilize the guest's car? He shivered, even while he told himself that such fancies were absurd.

At any rate, they were coming up now. Every floorboard in the house creaked and

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the stairs played a tune like a broken old violin. He heard Hugo mumble something—the man had drunk far too much brandy—and then she said, "Leave all the rest to me."

Another shiver that had nothing to do with the cold ran through him. He couldn't think why it had. Surely, that was quite a natural thing for a woman to say on going to bed? She only meant, "You go to bed and I'll lock up and turn off the lights." He had often said it when his wife was alive. And yet it was a phrase that was familiar to him in quite another context.

Turning on his side away from the light and into fresh caverns under the icy sheet, he tried to think where he had heard it. A quotation? Yes, that was it. It came from *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth said it when she and her husband were plotting the old king's murder. And what was the old king's name? Douglas? Donal?

Someone had come out of the bathroom and someone else had gone in. Did they always take such ages getting to bed? The lavatory flush roared and a torrent rushed through the pipes that seemed to pass under his bed. He heard footsteps cross the landing and a door closing. Apparently, they slept in the room next to his.

He turned over, longing for the light to go out. It was a pity there was no key in that lock so that he could have locked his door.

As soon as the thought had formed and been uttered in his brain, he realized how fantastic it was. What, lock one's bedroom door in a private house? Suppose his hostess came in in the morning with a cup of tea? She would think it very odd. And she might come in. She had put this bottle in his bed and had placed a glass of water on the table. Of course he couldn't dream of locking the door, and why should he want to? One of them was in the bathroom *again*.

Suddenly he found himself thinking about one of the men he had sacked and who had threatened him. The man had said, "Don't think you'll get away with this, and if you show your ugly face within a mile of my place you may not live to regret it." Of course he had got away with it and had nothing to regret. On the other hand, he hadn't shown himself within a mile of the man's place.

The light had gone out at last. Sleep now, he told himself. Empty your mind or think about something nice—your summer holiday in the French villa, for instance, think about that.

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The gardens would be wonderful with the oleanders and the bougainvillea. And the sun would warm his old bones as he sat on his terrace, looking down through the cleft in the pines at the blue triangle of Mediterranean which was brighter and gentler than that woman's eyes. . .Never mind the woman, forget her.

Perhaps he should have the terrace raised and extended and set up on it that piece of statuary—surely Roman—which he had found in the pinewoods. It would cost a great deal of money, but it was his money. Why shouldn't he spend his own? He must try to be less sensitive, he thought, less troubled by this absurd social conscience which, for some reason, he had lately developed. Not, he reflected with a faint chuckle, that it actually stopped him from spending money or enjoying himself. It was a nuisance, that was all.

He would have the terrace extended and maybe a black marble floor laid in the salon. Fraser's profits looked as if they would hit a new high this year. Why not get that fellow Church to do all their printing for them? If he was really down on his luck and desperate he would be bound to work at a cut rate, jump at the chance, no doubt. . .

Damn it, it was too much! They were talking in there. He could hear their whisperings, rapid, emotional almost, through the wall. They were an absurd couple, no sense of humor between the pair of them. Intense, like characters out of some tragedy.

"The labor we delight in physics pain"—Macbeth had said that, Macbeth who killed the old king. And she had said it to him, Duncan, when he had apologized for the trouble he was causing. The king was called Duncan, too. Of course he was. Fraser was named Duncan and so was the king and he too, in a way, was an old king, the monarch of the Fraser empire. Whisper, whisper, breathed the wall at him.

He sat up and put on the light. With the light on he felt better· He was sure, though, that he hadn't left those car lights on. "Leave all the rest to me." Why say it that way? Why not say what everyone said, "I'll see to everything?"

Macbeth and his wife had entertained the old king in their house and murdered him in his bed, although he had done them no harm, done nothing to them but be king. So it wasn't a parallel, was it? For he, Duncan Fraser, had done something, something which might merit vengeance. He had sacked Hugo

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Crouch and taken away his livelihood. No, it wasn't a parallel at all.

He turned off the light, sighed, and lay down again. They were still whispering. He heard the floor creak as one of them came out of the bedroom. It wasn't a parallel—it was much more. Why hadn't he seen that? Lady Macbeth and her husband had had no cause no cause.

A sweat broke out on his face and he reached for the glass of water. But he didn't drink. It was stupid not to but—the morning would soon come. "O, never shall sun that morrow see!" Where did that come from? Need he ask?

Whoever it was in the bathroom had left and gone back to the other one. But only for a moment. Again he heard the floorboards creak, again someone was moving about on that dark landing. Dark, yes, pitch-dark, for they hadn't switched the light on this time. And Duncan felt then the first thrill of real fear which didn't subside after the shiver had died but grew and gripped him in a terror the like of which he hadn't known since he was a little boy and had been shut up in the nursery closet of his father's house.

He mustn't be afraid, he mustn't. He must think of his heart. Why should they want vengeance? He'd explained. He'd told them the truth, taking the full blame on himself.

The room was so dark that he didn't see the door handle turn. He heard it. It creaked very softly. His heart began a slow steady pounding and he contracted his body, forcing it back against the wall.

Whoever it was had come into the room. He could see the shape of him—or her—as a denser blackness in the dark.

"What. . .? Who. . .?" he said, quavering, his throat dry.

The shape grew fluid, glided away, and the door closed softly. They wanted to see if he was asleep. They would kill him when he was asleep. He sat up, switched on the light again, and put his face in his hands. "O never shall sun that morrow see!"

He'd put all that furniture against the door, that's what he'd do—the chest of drawers. his bed, the chair. His throat was parched now and he reached for the water, taking a long draft. It was icy cold.

They weren't whispering any more. They were waiting in silence. He got up and put his coat round him. In the bitter cold he began lugging the furniture away from the walls, lifting the iron bedstead that felt so small and narrow when

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he was in it but was so hideously heavy.

Straightening up from his second attempt, he felt it—the pain in his chest and down his left arm. It came like a clamp, like a clamp being screwed and at the same time slowly heated red-hot. It took his body in hot iron fingers and squeezed his ribs. And sweat began to pour from him as if the temperature in the room had suddenly risen tremendously.

Oh, God, oh, God, the water in the glass! They would have to get him a doctor, they would have to, they couldn't be so pitiless. He was old and tired and his heart was bad.

He pulled the coat round the pain and staggered out into the black passage. Their door—where was their door? He found it by fumbling at the walls, scrabbling like an imprisoned animal, and when he found it he kicked it open and swayed on the threshold, holding the pain in both his hands.

They were sitting on their bed with their backs to him, not in bed but sitting there, the shapes of them silhouetted against the light of a small low-bulbed bedlamp.

"Oh, please," he said, "please help me. Don't kill me, I beg you not to kill me. I'll go on my knees to you. I know I've done wrong, I did a terrible thing. I didn't make an error of judgment. I sacked Hugo because he wanted too much money for the staff, he wanted more money for everyone and I couldn't let them have it. I wanted my new car and my holidays. I had to have my villa—so beautiful, my villa, my gardens. Ah, God, I know I was greedy but I've borne the guilt of it for months, every day—on my conscience—the guilt of it."

They turned, two white faces, implacable, merciless. They rose and came toward him, scrambling across their bed.

"Have pity on me," he screamed. "Don't kill me! I'll give you everything I've got, I'll give you a million—"

But they had seized him with their hands and it was too late. She had told him it was too late.

"In our house!" she said.

"Don't," said Hugo. "That's what Lady Macbeth said. What does it matter whether it was in our house or not?"

"I wish I'd never invited him."

"Well, it was your idea. You said let's have him here because he's a widower and so lonely. I didn't want him here. It was ghastly the way he insisted on talking about having fired me when we wanted to keep off

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the subject at any price. I was utterly fed up when he had to stay the night."

"What do we do now?" said Elizabeth.

"Get the doctor, or the police. It's stopped raining. I'll get dressed and go."

"But you're not well! You kept throwing up."

"I'm all right now. I drank too much brandy. It was such a strain, all of it, nobody knowing what to talk about. God, what a business! He was all right when you looked into his room a few minutes ago, wasn't he?"

"Half asleep, I thought. I was going to apologize for all the racket you were making but he seemed nearly asleep. Did you understand any of what he was trying to say when he came in here? I didn't."

"No, it was just gibberish. We couldn't have done anything for him, darling. We did try to catch him before he fell."

"I know."

"He had a bad heart, you know."

"In more ways than one, poor old man," said Elizabeth, and she laid a blanket gently over Duncan, though he was past feeling heat or cold or fear or guilt or anything any more.

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

This is the 18th exploit of Nick Velvet, the choosy crook, the thief who steals only those things that have no intrinsic value and who gets a minimum of $20,000 for pilfering the worthless . . . but the mixture this time is not the same as before. In this newest story the ingredients are, among others, a night-club comic, a cheap cuckoo clock, a Las Vegas gambling casino, a fraudulent land deal, an unsolved murder, a suave villain, and a dark-haired gal named Venture O'Shea. Who (including Nick Velvet) could resist that combination of elements—or ask for anything more? . . .

THE THEFT OF THE CUCKOO CLOCK

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet had visited Las Vegas on two previous occasions, but the city still held a sense of discovery for him, especially when he came upon it suddenly after driving for hours through the sparse Nevada desert. He'd been summoned by Brewster Billings, the night-club comic, and had driven the rented car from Los Angeles where he'd interrupted a vacation trip with Gloria. She'd pouted about being left alone, but he'd managed to convince her it was business, which indeed it was.

Billings himself greeted Nick at the door of his sprawling desert home a few miles outside of Vegas. "I gave the servants the night off," he explained, "so we'd be alone. Come this way, Mr. Velvet."

Billings was middle-aged and balding, not quite as lean and grinning as he appeared on television talk shows. From somewhere in the house came the barking of dogs, but Billings ignored them and poured Nick

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a drink. "Aren't you joining me?" Nick asked, accepting the glass.

"The doc says I have to cut down. Doing these lounge shows in Vegas is hell on an ulcer." For just a moment there was a flash of his public smile, then he said, "I hear you're good, Mr. Velvet."

"I'm good."

"I hear you steal things."

"Certain things. The object must have no intrinsic value, and my minimum fee is $20,000."

Brewster Billings didn't blink at the amount. "I work the lounge at the Clover Club. Been there for three years now, off and on. It's run by a man named Sherman Masset. He owns the Clover and another place up in Reno. In his office here in Vegas there's a cuckoo clock on the wall. I want you to steal it."

"Sometimes cuckoo clocks are valuable."

"This one isn't. It's a cheap one, and it doesn't even keep correct time. He keeps it because it was presented to him by a local businessmen's association."

Nick relaxed in his chair. "It should be a simple matter."

"Not as simple as you might think. Las Vegas casinos are well protected. There are guards, alarms, one-way mirrors, closed-circuit television, and lots more cute tricks. I can tell you what I know, but after that you're on your own."

"No problem," Nick assured him. "It shouldn't—"

He was interrupted by the sound of an opening door, and a tall young woman in blue jeans and a faded sweatshirt appeared in the hallway. Billings seemed surprised and a bit embarrassed. "I thought you'd call first before you drove out here."

"I didn't think you'd mind." Her wide mouth broke into a smile when she saw Nick. "But then I didn't know you had a visitor."

"Nick Velvet, this is Venture O'Shea. She handles public relations for the Clover Club."

"Pleased to meet you," Nick said. She was a bit too thin to be really beautiful, but her broad smile and glistening black hair more than made up for her thinness.

"Here to do a little gambling, Mr. Velvet?"

"You might say that."

"First trip?"

"Third. But I've never seen the Clover Club."

"Then you must have the tour." She turned to Billings for permission. "May I steal your guest when you're finished talking?"

He shrugged and said, "Sure.

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Just give us a few more minutes alone. I have to get ready for the ten o'clock show anyway." When she had wandered from the room, Billings gave Nick a man-to-man grin. "Venture is your ticket to the place. The guards all know her, and she can go anywhere. You might even invite her up to your room later."

"Thanks for the tip," Nick said.

Billings took a fat billfold from his pocket. "Here's a thousand on account. You get the rest when you deliver the cuckoo clock."

Nick left him and went in search of Venture O'Shea. He found her down the hall, glancing casually over a wall of framed photographs of entertainment celebrities, all of them signed with personal greetings to Brewster Billings. "These are all headliners who've appeared at the Clover," she explained, "while Brewster was playing the lounge."

"He's been there a long time."

"Too long. He's chained to the place."

"I'd like to see it."

"You will," she said with a smile. "Come on."

It was evening when they reached the Clover Club, and the line for the first show in the dining room wound snakelike through the lobby, at times threatening to disrupt the slot-machine players with their paper cups full of nickels and dimes. The place was little different from its neighbors along the Strip, though it was the only one with a green neon four-leaf clover revolving on top of a post in the dead center of the parking lot.

"You actually work in this place?" he asked the dark-haired girl, threading his way between two middle-aged women in slacks who were intent on the coin machines.

"Sure," Venture replied. "You get used to the noise after a bit."

"But do you get used to the people?"

She chuckled and led him into the center of the casino area, where blackjack and dice tables operated in a relatively serene atmosphere. "People are my business. Public relations. You have to know what they want, and especially what they want to be told." She pointed out the alarm system, then said, "Come on."

They spent close to an hour touring the casino and adjoining motel, and everywhere Nick saw evidence of the tight security—closed-circuit television cameras, uniformed guards, even special magnetic passes for

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certain parts of the building. The second floor consisted entirely of a dim maze of wooden catwalks that ran across the casino ceiling. "What's all this?" he asked, though he knew.

"There are one-way mirrors in the ceiling of the casino, overlooking the roulette and craps and blackjack tables. Our checkers come up here to watch what's going on. With a pair of binoculars they can detect a crooked shuffle or a substitution of dice."

"There's no one here now," Nick observed, staring through the one-way glass at a fat lady who was rolling the dice.

"There rarely is. But the dealers and stickmen never know when someone *might* be watching them. It helps keep them honest."

She led him to the third floor, using her magnetic card to unlock an office door. "It's time you met Sherman Masset, the owner."

Masset was seated behind a wide oak desk strewn with papers, working an electric adding machine with the skill of a lifetime accountant. He glanced up as they entered and motioned them in, but his fingers never missed a key as he finished adding the column of figures. He was a bulky man, more suited to a bank than a Vegas casino, and when he rose to greet them his voice was surprisingly soft.

"Giving someone the tour, Venture?"

"Nick Velvet, meet Sherman Masset. Nick's a friend of Brewster's."

"Oh?" The eyes sparkled with interest. "Brewster's been playing our lounge for three years now. He's a real star—a great comic."

"He certainly is," Nick agreed. "You're lucky to be able to keep him here. I've heard talk that the Hilton and Caesar's Palace would love to steal him away."

"Oh, no," Masset said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "Brewster is loyal to us. Nobody could get him away from here." His eyes strayed to the column of figures in the adding machine. Then, with a suddenness that took Nick by surprise, he shot out a question. "What's your line of work, Mr. Velvet?"

"Security devices."

"Oh? Of what sort?"

"Proximity alarms, electric-eye devices. Perhaps you'd be interested in something of that sort."

"Our security is quite good," Sherman Masset assured him. "As for proximity alarms, they would be of no use here. The Clover Club is always open, always filled with people."

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"Of course," Nick agreed. He let his eyes stray to the walls, taking in the big picture window that faced the towers of downtown Las Vegas. He moved on to another wall, noticing a framed Matisse print and a closed door to the next office.

"... twenty-four hours a day," Masset was saying. "We have some people who come down here to gamble at four in the morning because they can't sleep."

On the third wall he saw the cuckoo clock, an intricate pseudo-Swiss creation with a brass plaque attached to its front. As he stepped nearer to read the plaque he realized that the casing of the clock was really molded plastic grained to resemble wood. The engraving read: *For Sherman Masset/Man of the Year/1967/Las Vegas Betterment Association.*

"Admiring my clock?" Masset asked.

Nick turned quickly, a bit startled. "It looks like real wood till you get up close."

"Like so much of the city," the bald man said in his suave banker's voice. "Plastic—but it looks good."

"I see you're a civic leader."

"That was the year I helped get some churches built out here on the Strip. Civic leadership and good business go together. Before the churches were here I had to bus my hotel guests into downtown every Sunday."

"People really go to church out here?"

"You'd be surprised. The churches even accept casino chips in their collection baskets. And they get quite a few of them, too. Every Monday morning the priests and ministers drive around cashing them in."

"And gambling a bit, too?"

Sherman Masset shrugged. "That's the sort of town it is. Venture can tell you."

As if on cue the dark-haired girl stood up. "It's just ten o'clock. You want to catch Brewster's act, Mr. Velvet?"

He glanced back at the clock to verify the time. The clock was nine minutes slow. "Good idea," he told the girl. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Masset. Hope we see each other again."

"Enjoy your tour," the bald man responded. His fingers were already back at the adding machine.

Downstairs, the lounge show was just getting started. A girl singer in a shimmering silver dress ran through a few standards as Venture and Nick took a table down front, close to the elevated stage. "We'll get a bigger crowd as soon as the dinner show breaks," Venture said.

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"I don't mind," Nick said. "I dislike crowds."

"Then Vegas is the wrong place for you."

He sipped his drink and decided it was weak. "Where'd you get the name Venture?"

"It means a risky undertaking. My father thought it was a good name for me."

"There's nothing risky about your job here, is there?"

She glanced away. "Sometimes Sherman Masset. . ."

But her words were drowned out by a drum roll from the five-piece combo on stage. The silvery singer had disappeared and it was time for the star to come on. "Ladies and gentlemen," a voice boomed from a hidden loudspeaker, "the Clover Club takes great pleasure in presenting the star of our lounge—Brewster Billings!"

He came through the curtains to a mild round of applause from the half-empty tables. Scowling down at them he quipped, "I've heard more applause than that for a Democrat at a Republican fund-raising dinner. But never mind, I always get a bigger hand when I leave."

It took him a while to warm up the audience, but after five minutes he had them laughing. Nick had to admit he was pretty good, edging his humor with a self-deprecating quality that didn't come over nearly as well on television. Billings was Everyman, facing the world with a dread that he'd already lost the crucial roll of the dice.

"He's great," Nick whispered to Venture. "Why does he waste his time here in the lounge? I'd think he could be a headliner anywhere."

She didn't answer Nick, and he saw that her eyes had left the stage to concentrate on a man who was standing in the lobby, watching Billings perform through the open curtains that separated the two rooms. "Excuse me a moment," she whispered.

He followed her progress between the tables, thinking she meant to intercept the man and speak to him. Instead she picked up one of the house phones along the lobby wall and spoke briefly into it.

On stage Brewster Billings was reciting some off-color limericks that had the customers roaring with laughter. Venture O'Shea returned and slipped into her seat without a word. Nick glanced back just in time to see two uniformed security men approach the man who'd been watching through the curtains.

"Did you report him for getting a free show?" Nick asked her after the next burst of laughter had subsided.

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She shook her head. "He's a troublemaker."

"In what way?" he asked, but she didn't answer.

After a few more moments Billings finally bowed off to thunderous applause. He'd been right. He did get a bigger hand when he left.

"What now?" she asked Nick. "Like to gamble a bit?"

"Sure."

"Then I'll leave you and get back to work. It's been a pleasure showing you around, Mr. Velvet."

"Could I see you later, when you finish up? For a nightcap?"

"I'm afraid not tonight. I have a date."

"Too bad."

She rose from the table. "Hope we see each other again." She signaled the waiter and signed the check before Nick could reach for his wallet. Then she gave him a final smile and was gone.

He couldn't help feeling that her attitude had changed considerably after she'd seen that man. He wondered why and decided to find out. Anything that caused the security guards to get nervous might help him in the theft of the cuckoo clock.

Nick wasted a few quarters at the slot machines, then drifted over toward the side entrance. The security men had headed in this direction with their unwanted guest, and the chances were they'd simply ordered him to leave. Nick scanned the parking lot with its lighted fountain and revolving neon four-leaf clover, but he saw nothing. The man, whoever he was, had apparently departed.

He was just turning back to the door when a low moan reached his ears. It seemed to come from the clumps of plastic bushes that ran along the edge of the building. Nick bent to investigate and found the man he sought, just struggling to regain his feet in the midst of the tangle.

"Are you all right?" Nick asked, giving him a hand.

"As well as could be expected." The man held a hand to his head. He was short and dark, with a middle-aged paunch that showed he was no match for the strongarm security guards.

"I saw what they did," Nick said. "Why don't you call the police?"

"Wouldn't do any good," the man mumbled. He flexed his jaw a few times, then began to brush off his clothes.

"If they assaulted you—"

"I'll deal with it in my own way."

He started to walk away,

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favoring one leg slightly, but Nick put out a hand to stop him. "Look, I don't have any love for Sherman Masset either. Maybe we should talk about it."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Nick Velvet." He held out his hand.

The man accepted it. "Ron Webster."

"What about Masset? Why did his people throw you out?"

"I suppose because I've threatened to kill him."

"That seems reason enough. Let's go somewhere and I'll buy you a drink."

They went across the Strip to a small casino that boasted only a dozen slots and a single blackjack table. A hard-rock group was the main attraction, and the place was crowded with young people just old enough to order drinks.

"Now tell me about it," Nick said when they'd settled into a booth some distance from the amplified music.

"He killed my brother," Ron Webster said simply.

"Masset?"

"Yes. He murdered him."

"What did the police do?"

"Nothing. It happened a year ago, when Harry and I were partners in Webster Development, a land speculation company. We were buying up lots of desert property across the county line—it seemed a natural location for the next big casino boom. Of course we kept our activities a secret, but Harry's girl was a friend of Masset's. She tipped him to the whole deal, so he went after my brother and me.

"We saw we were suddenly holding a gold mine, so we refused to sell at the low price he offered. After that he tried all sorts of tricks, but we held on. Finally he pulled a really dirty deal. He circulated a rumor that the Federal government was going to buy up the land as an addition to their air-force test range. Naturally we wanted to sell before that happened. The air force would have paid next to nothing, under threat of foreclosure.

"About this time an out-of-town buyer turned up, offering us a more reasonable price. It was only half what we'd hoped to get, but we jumped at it. A few months later we learned the rumor was false, and the buyer was a stooge for Sherman Masset. We'd been conned."

"I see."

"Do you? My brother Harry has always been more a man of the West than me. When he learned what Masset had pulled, he went up to his office to beat the money out of his hide." He gulped his drink. "That was the last time I saw my brother alive.

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He turned up the next morning in a ditch on Route 95, shot once through the head."

"And you think Masset did it."

"Who else? The only trouble was, I couldn't prove it. Nobody would talk, and there wasn't even a bullet for evidence. It had gone right through his head. The police were at a dead end—a convenient dead end—and they wrote it off as a robbery-slaying."

"And that's why you want to kill Masset."

"That's why," Ron Webster said. "With my bare hands, when I get the chance. Trouble is, everyone at the casino knows me by sight. As soon as I walk in the place the word goes out."

Nick Velvet thought about it as he ordered another round of drinks. Finally he said, "Ron, I just might be able to help you—if you help me."

Two days later, just as the Clover Club was reaching the peak of its early-evening business, Ron Webster stepped into a phone booth in downtown Las Vegas and dialed a number. When the switchboard cut in with, "You're in clover at the Clover Club, good evening," he asked to speak with Sherman Masset.

It was past regular office hours, and Webster knew the secretaries would be gone for the night. Presently Masset's familiar voice came on the phone. "Hello. Masset here."

"Listen closely, Masset—there's a bomb set to go off in your casino in thirty minutes. This is the only warning you'll get."

The voice on the other end chuckled harshly. "I'm not buying bomb hoaxes today. Sorry."

"You'd better buy this one, Masset. Don't you recognize my voice?"

There was a moment's silence, then the voice on the other end whispered, "Ron Webster!"

"Time is running out. You have only twenty-nine minutes now." Then Webster hung up.

Dressed in a security guard's uniform he'd rented at a downtown costume shop, Nick Velvet quickly mingled with the hundreds of disgruntled patrons who were streaming out of the Clover Club in the early-evening twilight. "Somebody said it's a bomb scare," one woman complained, "and just when my machine was getting hot!"

Nick held open the front door and helped a few women down the steps. "Take your time now. There's no reason to panic."

Then, as the last of the stragglers were filing out, he

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went inside and headed across the casino lobby where police and bomb-squad experts had already begun their search. "Where you going?" one officer called out.

"Got to check the offices, make sure everyone is out."

"Hurry up. That bomb's set to go in seven minutes. We're clearing all the searchers out in five minutes, just in case."

"Right," Nick said. He waved an arm and hurried up the stairs.

The office floor was deserted, as he knew it would be, and he went directly to Masset's rooms. The door was standing open. Everyone had left in too great a hurry to lock the door or set the alarms.

He went to the wall and lifted off the plastic cuckoo clock. It was lighter than he'd expected, and easy to carry. In the outer office, above the secretary's empty desk, a loudspeaker crackled into life. "Please clear the building! Attention—please clear the building immediately! A bomb may go off in three minutes!"

Nick smiled and left the office. He had an advantage over the rest of them. He knew there was no bomb. He'd almost reached the back stairway when a voice barked, "Freeze right there, mister, or you're a dead man!"

He turned as slowly as he could and stared into the barrel of a shotgun leveled at his chest. The gun was steady in the hands of Sherman Masset.

"We meet again," Nick said, feeling awkward with the clock in one hand. He considered throwing it at Masset to make his escape, but that would lose him his fee.

"So we do. It's Velvet, isn't it? I thought I'd heard that name before. What are you doing with my clock?"

"Look, there's a bomb set to go off here in one minute."

Masset shook his head. "I don't think so. Webster's not the type to endanger innocent people. He's after me, and me alone. I figured the bomb scare was just to get me out of the club and into the parking lot where he could mix with the crowd and get a shot at me. That's why I decided to stay up here and risk the bomb. I'm a gambler, as you must know. But I hardly expected to discover someone stealing my cuckoo clock."

Nick had raised his empty right hand to his uniform cap in the face of the shotgun's threat. Now, feeling he could wait no longer, he flicked his fingers and sent the stiff cap spinning like a Frisbee straight at Sherman Masset's head. It threw off the gambler's aim for only an

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instant, but that was all that Nick needed. He was through the door to the stairs as the shotgun roared behind him, and he felt just the edge of the shot pattern against his arm.

But before he was halfway down the stairs he realized there were men coming up, attracted by the blast of the shotgun. "It sounded like the bomb," one of them called out. "Up on the third floor. Come on!"

Nick hesitated, turning back up, but Sherman Masset was behind him with the shotgun. "Stop that man!" Masset shouted. "He's a thief!"

Nick was cut off, trapped between the first and third floors with only a cuckoo clock for a weapon—a cuckoo clock he couldn't afford to give up or damage.

There was only one way out. He yanked open the second-floor door and ran onto the wooden catwalks that led across the casino ceiling. He knew there was no way out from here, but at least it was buying him some time.

"We've got him now," Masset said, appearing at the doorway with his shotgun. "One of you cover this door. The rest of you spread out on the catwalks. He can't get away."

Nick watched them approaching through the dimness, saw Masset raise his shotgun once more. "You'd better surrender, Velvet. You're at a dead end. And this time I won't miss."

Nick looked down at the dice table twenty feet below, through the one-way mirror. He drew a quick breath and vaulted the wooden railing, shattering through the casino ceiling.

His feet hit the green baize table in a shower of glass and he felt it buckle under the force of his fall. Then he was off the table, onto the floor, and facing a policeman who'd come running up. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"Bomb upstairs," Nick gasped. "Get help for the injured."

The policeman ran off and Nick hurried to the side door, brushing the slivers of glass from his uniform. He was still clutching the clock as he made his way through the crowd.

Ron Webster was waiting at a bar outside of town. He took a look at Nick's bleeding hand and limping walk and asked, "What happened to you?"

"Minor battle wounds. A few glass cuts, some nicks from shotgun pellets, and a slightly sprained ankle. All in a day's work."

"But you got what you went after?"

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"I got it," Nick confirmed. "Thanks for your help."

"I suppose Masset will have the police on my tail for that phony bomb threat."

"Maybe not. He can't prove it was you." Nick ordered drinks and sat down. He was wearing a raincoat over the security uniform and was anxious to get back to his hotel room to change clothes. Raincoats in Las Vegas tended to make one look conspicuous. "But it might be a good idea to forget your plan for vengeance. I have an idea Sherman Masset is about to encounter some trouble without any help from you."

Webster nodded. "Maybe you're right. I think I'll drive down to Los Angeles for a few weeks until this blows over."

They parted outside the bar and Nick drove to his motel. After he'd showered and treated his cuts, he phoned Brewster Billings. But there was no answer at the desert home, and Nick realized he would be already at the Clover Club for the ten o'clock show. Things would be back to normal there now, despite the hole in the ceiling.

He sat down on the bed and picked up the cuckoo clock. If he couldn't deliver it till morning, at least he was going to find out what made it worth $20,000 to a night-club comic.

Billings opened the door at ten the next morning and stepped aside to let Nick enter. "You were quite a sensation at the club last evening. They were talking about it all night."

"I usually try to be a bit less spectacular," Nick admitted.

Billings glanced at the paper bag that Nick was carrying. "You brought the clock?"

"Certainly."

"Come in. Venture is here, but we can talk in front of her."

Venture O'Shea rose from the breakfast table and came to greet Nick. It seemed obvious from her flowered dressing gown that she'd spent the night. "Hello, Nick. Good to see you again. Are you still enjoying our city as much as ever?"

He touched the Band-Aid that covered the cut on his hand. "I'm a bit bruised and battered, but I'm enjoying it."

"I understand Sherman Masset is checking the hotels for you."

"Las Vegas has a great many hotel rooms," Nick said, "and I have a great many names."

She brushed back some loose hair with her hand and turned to Billings. "You've kept me in the dark long enough, Brewster. Why did you hire Nick to steal that clock?"

Billings had removed it from its paper bag and stood admir-

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ing it as if it were some treasure of old. He set it carefully on the table between them and said, "This cuckoo clock is my passport out of here—out of the Clover Club and out of Vegas."

"What do you mean?"

He turned to her, his gentle comic's face replaced by hard lines of triumph. "Why do you think I've worked that damn lounge all these years? Because I like it? I've had to turn down offers from Miami Beach, from London—even a movie offer—to stay on here. I'm into Masset for a quarter of a million in gambling debts—have been for years—and he's making me work it off. I'm his slave, and until now I couldn't do a damn thing about it. He wouldn't even book me into the main dining room. It was always the lounge, two shows a night, and if I wanted to relax at the blackjack table between shows he was all for it. Anything to get me in a little deeper! But now all that's changed."

"How is it changed?" Venture O'Shea asked.

Billings had opened the little door of the clock and was examining the wooden cuckoo behind it. He breathed a sigh of relief and nodded his head. "You'll see soon enough. I called Masset this morning. He'll be here any minute."

"With his security men, probably." Nick got to his feet. "I'd better be going. So if you'll just give me my money—"

Billings reached into his pocket and tossed over a thick envelope. "That's it. Just about all the loose cash I've got, but it's worth it. I'm free of that scum at last!"

Nick flipped through the wad of bills, then tucked the envelope away. He was starting for the door when he saw the long black limousine pull up in front of the house. Sherman Masset was driving and he seemed to be alone. "Perhaps I'll stay after all," Nick decided.

Masset entered the front door in a hurry, all business, but he stopped dead when he saw Venture and Nick. "What is this? You have this thief in your house, Brewster?"

"He was my employee for a brief time yesterday," Billings explained with a smile.

"Cut the comedy. You're not on stage now. What is this?" Then he saw the cuckoo clock on the table and his mouth dropped open.

"That's right, Sherman. I've got the clock. I'm free of you at last." Billings turned to Nick and Venture. He was playing his big scene now, and not for laughs. "You see, about a year ago a guy named Harry Webster was found shot to death on a highway outside of Vegas. He'd

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been killed some other place and dumped there, and his brother Ron has always charged he was killed by Sherman Masset in a dispute over ownership of some desert land. Until now there has never been any evidence linking Masset with the killing." He lifted the cuckoo clock gently in his hands.

"What is this?" Masset repeated, but his face was drained of color.

"The bullet that killed Harry Webster passed through his head and hit this clock, just as the cuckoo had come out to strike the hour." He opened the little door to show them. "The slug is still there, and I'll bet there are traces of human blood and tissue still clinging to it. When I was up in your office one day I realized that the cuckoo had stopped appearing just after Harry's murder. I took a look in the clock and saw the bullet lodged in there. I couldn't extract the bullet or get the clock past your security men, so I hired Velvet to steal it for me."

"Have you told the police about this?" Masset asked softly.

"Not yet. If I'd wanted you in jail I'd have sent them to your office for the clock in the first place. No, I just want my freedom. I want you to erase my gambling debt and let me go. Otherwise the clock goes to the police, with your name right on this plaque. That's why you couldn't get rid of it after the shooting—because your name is on it, because the Las Vegas Betterment Association would wonder what happened to it."

"That's still no evidence I killed him."

"It might be enough for a jury. It would certainly be enough to have the police back on your tail. You had the motive, and he was killed in your office."

Sherman Masset's face hardened. His eyes went from one to the other, seeking a way out. Finally he said, "You have your freedom, Brewster. The gambling debt is canceled. Come by the office and I'll return your IOUs. Now give me the clock."

Nick Velvet cleared his throat. "Just a minute," he said. It was the first he'd spoken since Masset's arrival.

"What—you want something too?" Masset's hands were already reaching out for the clock.

"It's really none of my business, but I don't think you killed anybody, Masset. He was shot in your office, and I suppose you had your men dump the body where it was found, but you didn't kill him."

"What do you mean?" Brew-

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ster Billings asked. "Am I paying you to turn against me?"

"You paid me to steal the clock and I did it," Nick said. "And that's what tells me Masset is innocent. Look at that clock—a cheap plastic thing that could be duplicated anywhere. The bird inside is a piece of wood, equally cheap. Are we to believe that Masset would leave this clock with its incriminating bullet hanging on his office wall? He could have bought a duplicate clock and switched the plaque to it. Or he could have destroyed the whole thing and invented a story to explain its disappearance. Simplest of all, he could have kept the clock but removed the bullet from the cuckoo. Instead he kept the entire thing intact."

"Why?" Venture O'Shea asked.

"Why? There can only be one answer. *He didn't know the bullet was in there!* But if he fired a shot at a man standing in front of the clock, and the man died, and the cuckoo stopped working at the same time, he *would* know the bullet hit it. If he didn't know the bullet was there, it means he didn't fire the shot. More than that, it means he wasn't even in the room when the shot was fired."

Brewster Billings spoke softly. "But if he didn't kill Webster, who did?"

Nick stood up. "The killer had to be someone with access to Masset's office, someone Harry Webster hated as much as he hated Masset because of the land deal. More than that, the killer would have to know I'd be delivering the clock to Billings this morning, and would have to arrange to be here with a gun to intercept it. You brought no gun, Masset, or you'd have used it before now."

"But I brought one," Venture O'Shea said, and her hand came out of the dressing-gown pocket holding a tiny .22 automatic.

Billings and Masset stepped back, raising their hands, but Nick Velvet stood his ground. "It's out in the open now, isn't it, Venture? You were Harry Webster's girl—the one who tipped Masset to the land deal. That's why you knew his brother Ron so well, why the sight of him upset you. When Harry went up to Masset's office that day he found you instead. He was in a rage at what you'd done, and you shot him, perhaps in self-defense. But you left Harry's body there and ran.

"Masset found the body and disposed of it, fearing he'd be blamed for the murder. He never knew about the bullet in the clock. You must have

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guessed, when the cuckoo stopped working, but you left it there because it didn't implicate you. It was far more dangerous for you to be caught trying to remove the bullet or in any way calling attention to it. But once I stole the clock you had to act.

"So you came home with Brewster last night to be on the scene when I delivered the clock. And you brought a gun in case Masset called the police or refused to go along with Brewster's offer. Because you couldn't risk having the case reopened, could you, Venture? Too many people might start remembering you were the dead man's girl."

"Nothing's being reopened," she said. "Give me the clock."

Nick had already been paid, and this time he didn't mind damaging it. He hurled it at her gun hand and she was too surprised to move out of the way in time.

Later, when the police had come and gone, Sherman Masset said, "I want to thank you, Velvet, for what you did. You were right, of course—it was Venture who told me about the land deal. If I tell the police what I know, I think they'll have a case against her."

"What about me?" Brewster Billings asked.

"I stick to my word. Your gambling debt is canceled."

Nick left and headed back across the desert to California. The police had taken the clock as evidence and now the whole venture was over. He felt a bit sad—until he touched the bulge of money in his pocket.

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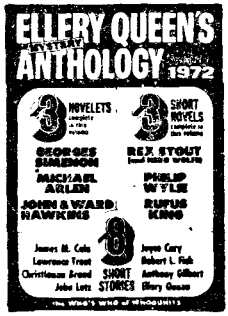

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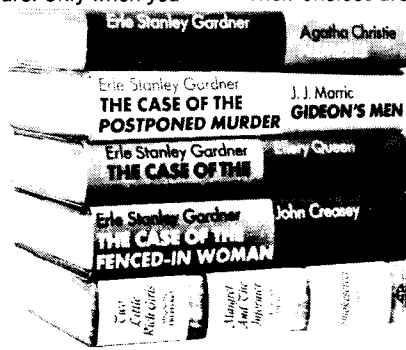

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